Public understanding of product lifetimes and durability (1)

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

July 2011
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Final Report to the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs

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This research was commissioned and funded by Defra. The views expressed reflect the research findings and the authors’ interpretation; they do not necessarily reflect Defra policy or opinions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was carried out by Brook Lyndhurst Ltd.

We wish to thank to our clients at Defra for their thoughtful contributions to the research process.

We would also like to thank those who gave their time to be interviewed: Alice Baverstock, Davide Minotti, Gerrard Fisher, William Wylie, Nick Blakey and Judicaille Hammond.

Thanks too to Criteria Ltd for their skilful recruitment of the group participants, and last but not least, thanks to the 115 participants themselves for their open and enthusiastic contributions to the group discussions.

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1 Executive Summary

To investigate opportunities for lengthening products’ lifetimes, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioned two parallel studies: one to model lifecycle environmental benefits and the feasibility of extending product lifetimes (ERM); the other to explore consumer understanding of, and appetite for, longer product lifespans (Brook Lyndhurst). This report presents the key findings and implications for policy and communications from the consumer research project.

Defra’s interest in lengthening product lifetimes – through the manufacture of more durable products and by consumers keeping products in use for longer – stems from the potential that longer product lifetimes have for reducing the material and carbon impacts of consumption. In theory, longer product lifetimes could reduce the rate of replacement (or churn) of consumer goods and therefore spread the environmental costs of any product over a longer period of time.

The research aims to identify consumer attitudes and behaviours that may represent either barriers to or opportunities for developing longer lifetimes for a wide range of products. It involves detailed, qualitative research into consumer understanding of product lifetimes including consumers’ motivations for purchasing products and their attitudes and behaviours towards the products they use and dispose of. Overall, the findings contribute to the evidence base relating to the potential role of consumers in improving the sustainability of consumption patterns.

This research project was the first stage in a series of research looking at consumer attitudes and behaviours towards product lifetimes and reuse. The second stage of research focused on reuse of bulky items and the research findings have been reported in a separate document: Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items, for Defra.

1.1 Method

The research followed a qualitative approach. It involved a brief (non-systematic) literature review designed to inform the design of the primary research, followed by twelve discussion groups involving 115 individual participants. Groups were spread across the country and across socio-demographic groups covering the spectrum of life-stages and household incomes.

Discussions covered five main product categories (using thirty specific product examples1) within the context of three different phases of the ‘consumption life-cycle’: purchase;

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1 Selected categories and products were covered in each group to keep the number of items to a manageable number for participants to think about.
products in use; and disposal or donation/sale of products to a ‘second life’. The five main product categories discussed by participants were clothing, furniture and interiors, electronics, major appliances and small appliances.

When reading this report 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.

1.2 The literature reviewed

While the review included 60 sources that touch on product lifetimes in some way, only a few provide comprehensive explorations of consumer attitudes and behaviour. The most useful evidence comes from work by Professor Tim Cooper and colleagues (on appliances and electronics) and by Fisher et al. (on clothing, for Defra). Very little is known about consumer views on the lifespan of furniture or interiors.

The literature demonstrates how product lifetime – as interpreted by consumers - is not simply a question of design or material durability. Various studies show that household durables or clothing are thrown away before they are broken beyond repair: a widely cited figure is that one-third of appliances are in working order when disposed of (Cooper, 2004). ² The figure was as high as 59% for computers and mobile phones in the same study. It has even been suggested that some 90% of all products become waste within six months of purchase.³ The availability of cheap products and consumers’ perceived need to be up-to-date are thought to be the most important factors in contributing to this high rate of product churn.

The literature also suggests that individual consumers display inconsistent attitudes and behaviours towards product lifespans (Cooper, 2003). Sometimes they put effort into finding more durable products, taking care of them in use, or getting them repaired. At other times, and for other products they own, they treat products as disposable and therefore not worth caring for. None of the literature reviewed identified environmental motivations as a key driver of consumer interest in durability or product lifetime.

1.3 Key findings from the discussion groups

This research project explored in detail participants’ understanding and expectations of product lifetimes and how this influenced attitudes and behaviour to products at the point of purchase, in use, and when items were discarded.

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² Based on interviews with a demographically representative sample of 802 households.
1.3.1. Participants’ expectations of product lifetimes

For the 30 products asked about in the groups, there was a clear gradient in expected lifetimes; a finding which has proved useful in helping to inform our analysis of differences by product type.⁴ Our findings may also indicate that expectations of product lifetimes could be getting shorter. If, for example, our expected lifetime results are compared with Coopers and Mayers’ results from 2000, we see a reduction in the expected lifetime from 10 to seven years for televisions, two to four years for mobile phones and six to four years for computers.⁵ However, the results from this research would need to be tested quantitatively before they could be generalised to the population more widely and compared robustly with Cooper and Mayers’ earlier findings. The results from this research are as follows:

- The general consensus for the expected lifetime for most clothing items was two years or less, and under five years for most consumer electronics and small appliances.
- Expectations for beds, sofas, carpets, curtains, TVs, washing machines and cookers were most often between five and ten years.
- Only kitchen units, wardrobes and boilers had a consensus expectation of a lifespan of more than ten years.

1.3.2. Participants’ understanding of product lifetimes

The concept of a product lifetime was fluid for each participant and was typically formulated on a case-by-case basis for different products. It comprised a mix of:

- how long participants expected something would last before it broke; and
- how long they wanted it to last before they updated it.

We found that reliability was important for most products (even ones expected to be kept for only a short time) but that in general durability was not important – except when it came to products that people chose to ‘invest’ in.

It was also apparent that the predominant concern that participants had when thinking about how long they would want and expect something to last was to achieve good value. In most cases some calculation involving (at least in part) price over expected lifetime was the means by which good value was assessed. This applied to motivations surrounding both purchase and repair decisions.

1.3.3. Participants’ attitudes and behaviours that shape products’ lifetimes

Detailed analysis of the group discussions revealed that any given participant could hold a number of different, and at times competing, attitudes towards product lifetimes.

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⁴ Findings result from the question: “how long you normally expect to use the product for, before it breaks, it is replaced or you dispose of it?”
⁵ The results of the two studies are not directly comparable due to different methodologies and different definitions of expected lifetimes. However, they may be very broadly indicative of change over time. See section 4 for a fuller discussion of the comparison between the two studies.
In seeking to impose order and meaning on what was essentially a personal, subjective understanding of a product’s lifetime, we identified themes in participants’ attitudes and behaviours in respect of the different products they talked about. These themes are referred to as up-to-date, workhorse and investment. The key characteristics of each theme (as they relate to each stage of the consumer product lifecycle) are summarised in the table below.

**Table 1 – Summary table of key characteristics of up-to-date, workhorse and investment categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Up-to-date</th>
<th>Workhorse</th>
<th>Investment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How the product looks is of key importance. Closely related to status, belonging and identity of participants.</td>
<td>How the product functions is of key importance.</td>
<td>Relatively expensive, ‘quality’ purchases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes, interior accessories, electronics.</td>
<td>Major and small appliances, large items of furniture.</td>
<td>From any product category – cuts across both workhorse and investment. Most commonly talked of ‘investments’ made in electronics, large furniture and major appliances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime estimate to get value: expect to last reliably for a short period until updated.</td>
<td>Lifetime estimate to get value: expect to last until broken. On average, longer lasting than up-to-date products. Proxies of price, brand and quality used to signify lifetime.</td>
<td>Longer lifetime important: brand key signifier of product worthy of investment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repair usually not an issue unless product breaks before participants ready to update.</td>
<td>Repair considered to extend lifetime but many barriers to repair. Perceived value and convenience of repair low.</td>
<td>Repairs considered and efforts made to take care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warranties sometimes used for electronics but dissatisfaction with inconvenience of going without.</td>
<td>Warranties sometimes used to achieve value, but dissatisfaction with duration, value and service apparent.</td>
<td>Warranties may be used to give peace of mind and also to signify quality as well as to protect product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants claimed they tried to give ‘perfectly good’ products a second life. But unwanted products could end up in the bin/tip if: product considered unsuitable for second life; a ‘clear out’ happened; or reuse channel not known about.</td>
<td>Rare second life because workhorse products usually broken on disposal.</td>
<td>Second life envisaged at disposal – but distant possibility at time of purchase. Potential issue of products being too ‘out of date’ to be wanted because kept for so long.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 above illustrates, the lifetime of products (both expected and actual), as well as participants’ attitudes and behaviours towards those products, varied considerably between the different categories of up-to-date, workhorse and investment.

### 1.3.4. Findings on up-to-date products

These are the products with the least obvious potential for longer lifetimes. However, the findings suggest that there may be some scope for small, incremental changes in consumer attitudes and behaviours towards up-to-date products that may be worth exploring further. The findings are as follows:
Purchasing up-to-date products
Even in respect of up-to-date products, participants still showed some interest in making sure that at least some of their purchases would last long enough to represent ‘good value’. This manifested itself as an interest in product reliability over a short period of time and sometimes in annoyance when products did not last for as long as expected – even if that expectation was already very low. This was particularly true for relied upon products such as laptops, mobile phones and MP3 players.

Taking care of up-to-date products
There was little in the group discussions to suggest that participants routinely took ‘extra’ care of up-to-date products. Warranties were also rarely used and repairs on broken products that were not under guarantee or warrantee were only infrequently carried out. However, this was less true for up-to-date electronic products than for other products.

Disposing of up-to-date products
The most promising findings around up-to-date products came in respect of the attitudes and behaviours related to product disposal. Participants often reported feeling bad about wasting otherwise ‘perfectly good’ products that were not up-to-date enough and some participants actively tried to give at least some of their up-to-date products a second life. There were also some interesting findings on the effect of ‘hoarding’ and ‘purging’ behaviours. It may be that such behaviours could increase the likelihood of products ending up in the bin or ‘tip’, although more work would be needed to unpack the detailed resource implications of hoarding and purging.

1.3.5. Findings on workhorse products
In contrast to up-to-date products, findings in respect of workhorse products suggested a wider range of opportunities for policies and interventions aimed at lengthening products’ lifetimes. The key findings are as follows:

Purchasing workhorse products
Interest in the expected length of products’ lifetimes was more of a factor in achieving good value for this category of products than it was for up-to-date products. Conversely, fashion, innovative features and the need to update products appeared far less important considerations when buying a workhorse product.

However, despite participants’ interest in the lifetime of these products, they reported that there was no reliable, transparent information available to them. The most commonly used proxies of brand and price were said to be unreliable indicators of products’ lifetimes by many. This in turn had the effect of making participants feel as though the lifetimes of workhorse products were ultimately more a matter of luck than judgement.
The subjective and unreliable nature of proxies for product lifetimes appeared to compound the difficulty that participants reported in justifying the purchase of a potentially longer-life, but more expensive, product – they simply could not be certain enough that it would last sufficiently long to represent good value.

**Taking care of workhorse products**

Although caring behaviours in general were not particularly widespread in respect of workhorse products, such products were more likely to be under warrantee and more likely to be repaired than up-to-date products. However, participants commonly reported dissatisfaction with the coverage and operation of warranties.

Despite participants’ often expressed annoyance when workhorse products broke down sooner than they had expected, the value of repairing such products was often seen as highly questionable. Perceived inconvenience, perceived expense (of both labour and parts) and the relatively low prices of replacement products all contributed to participants’ unwillingness to get workhorse products repaired.

**Disposing of workhorse products**

Most participants disposed of workhorse products because they had broken down. They reported that larger appliances were often taken by retailers, smaller appliances tended to go into the bin and items of furniture tended either to be given away, sold or to be disposed of in the ‘tip’.  

**1.3.6. Findings on investment products**

Interest in product lifetimes and specifically in product durability was most apparent when participants discussed investment products. This interest encompassed the entire product lifecycle from purchase, through use and disposal.

**Purchasing investment products**

When purchasing an investment product, participants reported a range of ‘investigative’ behaviour and planning to ensure that they bought the right product that would last them a long time. Some participants also reported purchasing extended warranties to protect investment products – sometimes at great expense.

**Taking care of investment products**

Caring behaviours for investment products were far more apparent than for other kinds of product, including a willingness to have products repaired and even to purchase products with ease of repair in mind to ensure that such products could be made to last.

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6 Disposal behaviours are explored in more detail in the second stage of the research - Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items, for Defra.
Disposing of investment products
Participants reported keeping investment products for a long time before they disposed of them. Generally, reasons for disposal were because the products had broken beyond repair or because a decision had been made to update the product.\(^7\)

1.4 Implications and opportunities

Our findings suggest that consumer agency is likely to be of central importance in any attempt to prolong product lifetimes. Overall, participants generally did not give the impression that they attempted to take responsibility for prolonging the lifetimes of the products they owned. On those occasions where they did try to take responsibility for a product’s lifetime, they reported encountering a number of barriers that frustrated their efforts.

Some of these barriers appear to be more formidable than others. In particular the easy affordability of new products and the need to be up-to-date present two significant challenges to lengthening product lifetimes and slowing product churn. Despite this, however, some of the attitudes and behaviours identified in the research point to a number of opportunities for positive change.

1.4.1. Learning lessons from the ‘investment mindset’

The finding that most participants could hold an ‘investment mindset’ for at least some of the products they owned perhaps shows that the attitudes and behaviours associated with a ‘throwaway society’ are not all-pervading. Consumers can and sometimes do take an interest in longer-life, durable products.

However, the extent of this interest should not be exaggerated. Amongst our participants it was sporadic and idiosyncratic. Furthermore, it did not relate to any understanding of, or motivations around, the environmental benefits of keeping products for longer.

Given that investment products are a sub-set or cross-cut of both workhorse and up-to-date products, the behaviours and attitudes that relate to them could provide lessons for promoting the longer life of other products. Key points to bear in mind about investment products from the point of view of developing interventions were that they were:

- valued by participants and also tended to be valuable – i.e. expensive in monetary terms in both an absolute and relative sense;
- more likely to be large items of furniture, expensive electronics and major appliances;
- often judged on brand reputation and length of warranty.

\(^7\) Disposal behaviours are explored in more detail in the second stage of the research - Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items, for Defra.
1.4.2. Key themes in addressing the public’s understanding of product lifetimes

Based on our analysis of the findings summarised above, key themes have been identified by the research team across the various opportunities for extending product lifetimes:

**Start from where consumers currently are**
In particular, recognise the fundamental importance of consumers’ need to be ‘up-to-date’, by seeking to build on social norms around the ‘wrongness’ of waste and by promoting the benefits of the ‘investment mindset’.

**Help consumers to reduce the risk of making the wrong choice**
Provide them with clearer and more certain means for judging the expected lifetimes of products and repairs.

**Focus on value and perceived value**
Longer life products have to offer consumers clear and apparent value when compared with shorter life, possibly cheaper alternatives.

**Improve service performance to help keep products in use**
This potentially includes both innovations in product service systems as well as improvements to warranties/guarantees and repair services.

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 and sets out more specifically the possibilities for intervening to promote longer product lifetimes in respect of up-to-date and workhorse products in turn.

1.4.3. Opportunities to extend the lifetime of up-to-date products

- Working with manufacturers to develop the potential for updatable and upgradable products that do not have to be replaced in their entirety.
- Working with retailers and manufacturers to develop ‘anchor’ or ‘classic’ products of home furnishing and clothing.
- Building on existing consumer interest in the care of up-to-date electronic products.
- Working with manufacturers and service providers (particularly of electronic products, and specifically of mobile phone services) to improve the level of service offered to consumers after purchase based on rewards for keeping products.
- Providing clear information to consumers on locally available reuse channels including information about the acceptability of products for reuse.
- Continuing support for the development of second hand markets.
1.4.4. Opportunities for extending the lifetime of workhorse products

- Better product lifetime information for consumers thinking about purchasing workhorse products, with an emphasis on bringing value to the consumer.
- Working with manufacturers to encourage product design more amenable to repair, including the availability and affordability of spare parts.
- Working with the providers of warranties (both manufacturers and third parties) to improve both the reputation and service performance of warranties.
- Working with manufacturers to improve the level of service offered to consumers after purchase.
- Exploring how repair networks could be supported and encouraged, including online information resources for consumers.
- Providing clear information to consumers on key points of product care, based on manufacturers’ knowledge of product performance.

The role for government in many of these possible interventions appears to be fairly limited, and much will no doubt depend upon successful engagement with business stakeholders.

This research suggests that success in promoting the kind of interventions detailed above would be expected to give consumers the agency they now lack. In other words, given the right products and services, there appears to be the potential to expand both the willingness and ability of consumers to take at least some responsibility for prolonging the lifetimes of more of their products, more of the time.
2 Introduction and Background

This report presents and discusses the findings from research undertaken by Brook Lyndhurst for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) on investigating public attitudes and behaviours towards product lifetimes and durability. This chapter sets the policy context, defines the key terms used, presents the research aims and methodology and outlines the report’s structure. The subsections which follow are:

- Policy context (1.1);
- Research aims and objectives (1.2);
- Methodology (1.3).

The research project was the first stage in a series of research looking at consumer attitudes and behaviours towards product lifetimes and reuse. The second stage of research focused on reuse of bulky items and the research findings have been reported in a separate document: Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items, for Defra.

2.1 Policy context

Longer product life spans have recently emerged as an area of policy interest for Defra. Research in this area is being progressed by Defra on two fronts: firstly in terms of the environmental impacts and practical feasibility of lengthening product life spans; and secondly in terms of the attitudes and behaviours of consumers towards products with longer lifespans.

**Longer product lifespans: environmental and practical considerations**

Defra aims to reduce carbon emissions by improving the efficient use of resources. This has involved the department in work on sustainable production and consumption, with a focus on driving a reduction in the negative effects on the environment of products and services throughout their supply chain.

Lengthening product lifetimes is one potential means of reducing the negative environmental impacts of products. Longer lasting products have the potential to reduce overall lifecycle impacts by increasing the timescale over which the raw materials, manufacture, distribution, retail and disposal impacts are spread. However, the environmental impacts of longer product lifetimes require better understanding, as does the practical feasibility of delivering products with longer life spans to market.

**Longer product lifespans: consumer understanding**

Defra recognises that consumers have a key part to play in improving environmental outcomes. A particular focus within work on sustainable consumption and production is understanding how citizens can play a role in demanding sustainable goods and services, and in reducing the environmental impacts of their lifestyles. Central to this is understanding individuals’ behaviour, work which is led by Defra’s Centre of Expertise in Influencing Behaviour (CEIB).
The CEIB has been building up a body of evidence relating to consumer behaviour. However, relatively little is known in depth about public attitudes towards products with longer lifetimes. Of particular importance is the question of whether, and if so how, consumers can be encouraged to purchase and to keep using products with longer lifetimes.

**Defra policy work on longer product life spans**

Defra has therefore commissioned two pieces of work simultaneously, both aimed at enhancing understanding and informing possible policy development on longer product life spans – one addressing the practical implications of lengthening product life spans involving input from business stakeholders, the other considering consumer attitudes and behaviours. This report sets out the research findings on the work relating to consumer attitudes and behaviours. Research from the parallel project considering the feasibility of lengthening product lifespans has been conducted by Environmental Resources Management (ERM).8

**The interests of policy stakeholders**

Our research included interviews with six policy stakeholders (see the methodology section 1.3 below and annex A for more detail). The interviewees came from different divisions and branches within Defra, representatives of the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) and Waste Aware Scotland. In general, they confirmed the widespread interest in and need for this research project to improve the existing evidence base. In particular they stressed the need for a better understanding of:

- the extent to which consumers consider the lifetime costs of products at the point of purchase;
- which products are bought specifically on the basis of their durability/longevity;
- which products consumers care for – and why and how they care.

The interviewees also made it clear that the options for intervention in this area currently remain wide open and that better evidence is needed before any policies are progressed.

Reflecting the two-pronged approach to improving the evidence base, our policy interviewees discussed their interest in finding out more about the viability of a range of different interventions that could be aimed either at businesses or consumers. We have kept this in mind when analysing the implications of our research findings.

Because the purpose of this research has not been to test out possible interventions with consumers, our discussion of the implications of the findings for policy will only take place in general terms.

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8ERM for Defra (forthcoming) EV0445: Longer Product Lifetimes http://www.erm.com/Locations/UK/
2.2 Research aims and objectives

Very broadly, this research aimed to explore consumer attitudes and behaviours towards a wide range of products’ lifetimes with a view to understanding better the barriers and opportunities to developing longer product lifetimes, from the perspective of the consumer.

To research this broad aim, we considered the following research questions:

1. What understanding and expectations do consumers have of product lifetimes?
2. What part do product lifetimes play in consumer purchasing decisions?
3. What actions do consumers take (or not take) to extend the life of their products at purchase, during use and at disposal?

The objective of asking these questions was to develop the evidence base to inform possible future policy development or interventions that would work either directly with consumers and/or with manufacturers and retailers to encourage consumers to:

- reduce the ‘churn’ or turnover of products by
  - taking greater care of products
  - thinking differently about why they want to replace something or buy something new
- purchase products with a longer functional or technological lifespan, or that they will want to keep for longer
- give products a ‘second life’ by using the second-hand economy for disposing of and buying products.

2.3 Methodology

The main component of the research comprised qualitative discussion groups with consumers, preceded by a desk-based element that included a brief (non-systematic) literature review and interviews with policy makers. The objective of the desk-based element was to inform the design of the primary research. A summary of the findings from the literature review is presented in section 3 below and it can be found in full in the annexes to this report.

Primary research was carried out in the form of 12 discussion groups in six locations around England, with a total of 115 individual participants.

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 lifetimes and durability 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.

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9 The words ‘attitude’, ‘value’, ‘motivation’ and ‘driver’ could all conceivably be used in various contexts throughout the report. However, for ease of reading we have used ‘attitude’ throughout the general discussions. Our definition of ‘attitude’ is, ‘a settled way of thinking or feeling’.

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 recruitment criteria set out below to ensure a good coverage of key socio-demographic variables including age, socio-economic group and gender. Groups were held in six locations.

2.3.1. Recruitment criteria

Participants were selected on the basis of:

- location (a spread of groups across England in the different government office regions);
- income (using regional income data to determine low, average and high incomes) and;
- combined age and life stage criteria (either living with parents; no children (yet or ever); children at home; children having left home).

Our scoping research revealed that income, age and lifestage could be particularly interesting in terms of exploring differential attitudes towards product lifetimes. We also felt that recruiting to these criteria would help to ensure that participants had experience of purchasing a wide range of product types. Please see the annexes to this report for the full recruitment criteria, and Table 2 below for a summary.

11 Ibid, p36
Defra environmental segmentation questionnaire
Before the groups started, participants were also asked to fill in a questionnaire in order to later classify individuals by Defra’s environmental segmentation model on individuals’ attitudes and beliefs towards the environment.¹²

This task was carried out for cross-referencing purposes only and was not used as recruitment criteria and nor, therefore, for purposes of analysis.

Our decision not to recruit to Defra’s segmentation model was in part based on research findings which suggested that consumer decisions around product lifetimes were not usually driven by environmental considerations. We also felt that recruitment by lifestage would ensure the best possible spread of participants with experience of purchase and use of a wide range of products.

Please see the annexes to this report for the breakdown of participant numbers by Defra segment.

2.3.2. The discussion groups
A topic guide was used to steer the group discussions. It covered the following points:

¹² http://www.defra.gov.uk/evidence/social/behaviour/documents/behaviours-jan08-report.pdf Only 84 (out of 115 participants) completed the survey in such a manner that enabled us to attribute them to a Defra segment.
• Participants’ reasons and motivations for product purchases;
• How long participants expected to use products for;
• Products where durability was important to participants including motivations for wanting durability and attitudes and behaviours relating to durability;
• Participants’ responsibility for product lifetimes including experiences of and attitudes towards repair;
• Participants’ reasons and motivations for disposing of products and how disposed of items were treated.

**Stimulus tasks**

To complement the guided discussion, the participants in each group were given three stimulus tasks. The tasks were used to help avoid social desirability responses on the part of participants by helping to focus discussion without direct prompting on longer-lasting products. The tasks were:

1. **Pre-task booklet** (completed prior to the group and an example shown in the annexes to this report) to get participants thinking about actual products and reasons for buying them without direct prompts on durability. The booklet showing rooms in a house asked what participants had most recently bought and got rid of, and why, for each room of their house.

2. **Purchase motivations sort**: to get participants in male and female breakout groups thinking about their motivations for purchasing a specific, allocated category of products. The products discussed in each group are set out in the following table.

   The purchase motivations sort task involved participants sorting cards showing possible purchase motivations into order of importance. The motivations sorted were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influencing factors</th>
<th>Suggested motivations on purchase decisions to be sorted from least to most important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accompanying information/ product specification</td>
<td>Aesthetics/style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand</td>
<td>Recommendation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>Knowledge and/or attitude of shop staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy consumption</td>
<td>What’s in fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functionality/how well it will perform</td>
<td>Environmental considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty schemes/offers</td>
<td>Guarantee and/or warranty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Expected product lifetime sort**: to get participants, individually, to think about how long they would normally expect to use 15 products for before they gave them away, threw them away, sold them on, or put them into storage. This provided the platform for a group discussion around expectation of product lifetimes. Two sets of 15 product categories were used, one set in half of the groups and one set in the other half, covering 30 products in total, as set out in the table below.
The discussion groups lasted approximately one and a half hours. Audio recordings were made of the groups and the discussions were fully transcribed. As a thank you for participating in the discussion group (and to reimburse attendees for travel and their time), an incentive of £40 was given to each participant.

2.3.3. Interpretation and limitations of the research findings

The qualitative nature of the 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.

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.

The results from the stimulus tasks

The tasks in the groups were designed to provide a non-leading introductory hook to particular discussions rather than to generate statistical data. Due to the nature of the tasks and the small sample sizes, meaning can only be fully derived when the results are used in conjunction with data from the surrounding qualitative discussions.

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.\textsuperscript{13} 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.

**The possibility of social desirability responses**

In general we sought to reduce social desirability responses through careful structuring of the group discussion, and as set out above, the primary motivation for using sort exercises was to help to minimise participants giving responses that they thought were desirable, rather than fully honest and open responses. Despite this, there remains the possibility that both our questioning and 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 The structure of this report

This report presents a summary of the findings from the literature reviewed (in section 3) and then sets out the primary research findings and analysis in detail.

Section 4 briefly describes the analytical framework used in the report and then sections 5, 6 and 7 set out the key findings. Each of these substantive sections finishes with a set of conclusions and implications for policy interventions.

Section 8 contains consumer’s own ideas for policy interventions that were put forward during group discussions.

Finally, section 9 briefly sets out an overview of the conclusions from each of the substantive sections of the report.

\textsuperscript{13} Boeijj, H. Ibid pp200–202
3 Literature review: headline findings

This section provides a short summary of the key findings from the literature reviewed. The full literature review is set out in the annexes to this report, including a complete bibliography to the references contained in this report.

3.1 Literature reviewed

The literature review was conducted primarily to provide input into the design of the primary research. Given the research team’s existing knowledge in this area, it was felt that a rapid, non-systematic review was appropriate. Over 60 academic, grey and government sources were identified and reviewed (the bibliography for these references is available in the annexes to this report).

It is clear from these documents that the relative importance of the technological, economic and psychological influences on durability and extended product life has not yet been widely researched.

Tim Cooper and Kieren Mayers’ E-SCOPE research project on household appliances undertaken in the United Kingdom (Cooper and Mayers, 2000) and Cooper’s subsequent publications provide the main source of primary research and analysis on the subject, particularly with regard to appliances. Topics researched in the E-SCOPE study included:

- Expectations for appliance life spans
- The age and condition of discarded appliances
- The means by which they are discarded
- Factors that deter consumers from purchasing longer lasting appliances
- Attitudes and behaviour relating to repair

The following limitations of the findings from the literature were noted:

- There was very little research of direct relevance, and the main primary research on the subject of durability was conducted over a decade ago in 1998 and 1999 (Cooper and Mayers, 2000). However, Fisher et al. Research’s for Defra on clothing (Fisher et al., 2008), and M.E.L’s forthcoming work for WRAP on electrical products, in particular, have some useful relevant findings.
- Most of the research identified as relevant focused on clothing or large household appliances (and within that category, white goods received the most attention).
- Some findings on electronic products (brown goods) were identified, but very little was found on furniture and interiors.

The remainder of this section presents the headline findings from the literature review under the same headings used in the body of this report.
3.2 Consumer understanding of product lifetimes

The literature suggests that a number of factors combine to have the effect of shortening product lifetimes.

The need and opportunity to be ‘up to date’

It has been argued that possessions can often reflect people’s values and contribute to their identity. Replacing a product in the household may therefore take on a meaning beyond functionality. Instead replacement may be a signal to others, for instance, that individuals (or households) do not want to be associated with a particular item regarded as ‘out of date’ (Cooper, 2005b). A rise in disposable incomes, a fall in many product prices in real terms, the increased availability of a widening range of products and an increase in the amount of time and number of opportunities for consumer spending all facilitate the maintenance of an up-to-date identity.

It has also been argued that there is a trend towards increased pride in the presentation of the home, fuelled by wide-spread advertising and the proliferation of ‘make-over’ programmes.

These factors together have all been said to contribute to the premature disposal of products by consumers who wish to satisfy their consumption aspirations (Brook Lyndhurst 2007; Ward, 2007; Kane, 2003). This culture of consumerism has been termed the ‘throwaway society’.

The perceived disposability of many low-durability products

There is a reported perception amongst consumers that certain products are less durable and therefore that the expected ‘lifetime’ of an individual item is shorter than it was even a few decades ago. The literature also suggests increasing numbers of ‘semi-durables’ - items not designed to be in use for a long time - such as toasters and mobile phones that cannot easily be repaired or upgraded, and clothing and footwear that is not intended to be worn beyond a particular season (Cooper 2008b).

Issues such as our ‘throwaway culture’; fashion; advances in technology; and attitudes towards repair (rather than accurate knowledge of repair), are all said to influence why products are discarded. Research suggests that for those reasons, consumers may prefer to purchase new, updated products rather than to even consider the repair of old ones (Curran et al., 2006).

Consumer desire for some products to be longer-lasting

Cooper’s research suggests that there are a number of products which some people wish to keep for more than ten years (Cooper, 2004), and there are also a number of products (including small electrical appliances, white goods and some brown goods) which people tend more often to keep until they break beyond repair (Cooper, 2004). Both of these findings may point to a latent desire by some consumers to ‘hang on’ to some products. This may also suggest that if such products were more durable, consumers may actually keep them in use for longer.

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14 Over one quarter of respondents (n= 802) thought that cookers, fridges and freezers, hi-fi systems, telephones, faxes and answer machines, and home and garden tools should last at least 15 years, and more than one-tenth considered a reasonable life span to be over 20 years for these goods (Cooper, 2004)
Consumers’ feeling of responsibility towards some products

There were also findings that some consumers feel ‘responsibility’ towards certain products and may have an ‘ethic of care’\textsuperscript{15} (Watson, 2008). However, it should be noted that such feelings of responsibility do not necessarily slow down the rate at which consumers replace products, rather that they influence how consumers get rid of products (for example, products ‘too new’ to throw away may be put in storage, or sent to a charity shop rather than be taken to the tip) (e.g. Lindley and Barrett, 2003).

It may also be the case that different products engender different degrees of responsibility (or irresponsibility) - although consumer behaviour on this issue may not be easy to predict as the literature suggests that reasons for taking responsibility are likely to be emotional as well as utilitarian. For instance, a high degree of responsibility could be displayed towards valuable items (in terms of sentiment or money) through regular cleaning and maintenance, while less responsible approaches (for instance anything from a lack of regular maintenance through to acts of carelessness) may be taken towards other products in the household.

3.3 The part played by product lifetimes in purchasing decisions

The literature suggests that the part played by longer product lifetimes in purchasing decisions is minimal.

Product durability is not a priority motivation for most purchases

The findings from the literature review clearly suggest that product lifetimes and durability are not always – perhaps even not often – top of mind for most consumers. The literature suggests various underlying reasons why this might be the case:

- Price and quality are typically the most important considerations when purchasing a product (M.E.L for WRAP, forthcoming; Ipsos Marketing, 2008).
- Consumers generally do not have a ‘worked out’ position on product lifetimes: behaviour and motivations around lifetimes appear to be complex and inconsistent (Cooper, 2003).
- Not all product lifetimes would necessarily be extended by enhanced levels of product durability. In particular, attitudes towards fashion and technology may mean that certain products (i.e. clothing and electronics) are likely to be updated by consumers regardless of how much ‘life’ they have left in them.

There is, however, some consumer interest in how long products last

Research has shown that consumers may have some interest in/awareness of how long a product lasts, even if they do not generally prioritise product durability when choosing which product to buy. However, such interest/awareness may be bound up with a number of other considerations that take place during the purchase decision-making process:

- Consumer trust in claims around product longevity may be tied to brand (M.E.L for WRAP, forthcoming).

\textsuperscript{15} An ethic of care, in this context, suggests ongoing relations of care or consideration for some products, at least some of the time. This can be expressed in such ways as concern that things like domestic appliances and furniture should find a second use, or the investment of substantial time, energy, money and skill in the maintenance of particular objects (from Watson, 2008).
• Consumers rely on a number of proxies for product lifetime in the absence of direct claims from manufacturers or retailers about how long products should last (Christer and Cooper 2004; CSC, 2008). Cooper (2005b), however, warns that proxies such as brand and price are not adequate guides for consumers.

• There is a reported perception amongst consumers that product lifetimes are getting shorter (linked to beliefs about ‘built-in obsolescence’) (Cooper and Mayers, 2000).

• On the whole, consumer decisions over whether or not to buy longer-lasting products do not appear to be strongly motivated by a concern for the environment but appear to be more tied up with an interest in price and quality (M.E.L for WRAP, forthcoming).

### 3.4 Actions taken by consumers to extend product lifetimes

The percentage of products discarded which are either fully working or repairable (Curran et al., 2006; Cooper, 2004) suggests that many products are seen by consumers as ‘disposable’ or not worth repairing.

The literature focussed on two of the means by which consumers could take care of products: repair and warranties.

**There are significant barriers to product repair**

Part of ‘taking care’ of products may include a desire to repair broken products, and findings have shown consumer interest in having certain products repaired (e.g. Barr et al., 2001a; Cooper and Mayers, 2000). However, barriers to carrying out repairs currently appear to be significant:

• Furniture, appliances and electrical items were reported to be difficult and/or costly (relative to replacement costs) to repair (Cooper and Mayers, 2000);

• Consumers systematically perceived the price of repair to be higher than actual costs (Huysentruyt and Read, 2008);

• Many products fell outside the ‘worth repairing’ category in consumers’ minds, and their disposability and/or obsolescence was accepted by consumers;

• All bar the oldest age groups of respondents reported a lack of skills needed to repair clothes (Fisher et al., 2008; Tonglet et al., 2004).

• ‘Hassle’ was not reported explicitly as a barrier to getting products repaired, although it may have been implied in other reasons given by respondents in Fisher’s study (Fisher et al., 2008) such as ‘lack of time’ and ‘lack of availability of repair services’.

**Consumers did not always find that warranties were a good value way of caring for products**

Purchasing an extended warranty was not always found to represent value for money relative to the cost of replacement (or repair), though a minority of people did take out warranties on appliances, often to retain ‘peace of mind’ (Huysentruyt and Read, 2008).
3.5 Creating a second life for products

Reuse of unwanted products has been identified as an important means of improving resource efficiency. The literature suggests that donation of some products for reuse is fairly commonplace. In particular clothes and furniture are donated more often than other products.

Second-hand items are more frequently donated to charity than purchased

Research by the Association of Charity Shops in the East of England (ACS, 2006) revealed that:

- 78% of respondents had donated something to a charity shop, compared to 69% of respondents who had bought something;
- 41% of respondents had donated to a furniture reuse organisation, compared to 30% of respondents who had bought something

However, buying was found to be more popular than selling when it came to online auctions, car boot sales and second-hand (non-charity) shops (ACS, 2006).

The donation of clothes to charity is a popular and widespread reuse activity, but much unwanted clothing still ends up in the general waste stream

For clothing in particular, donation is a common method of disposal. In the Fisher et al. (2008) study, most participants claimed that they disposed of some of their unwanted clothing by donating them to charity through charity shops, recycling bins at supermarkets or doorstep bag collections. Cheaper clothes were more likely to be discarded in the bin and the clothing road map illustrates the extent to which this represents an issue for waste management.

Donating or selling items is convenient and appeases a sense of responsibility felt towards products, but is unlikely to be environmentally motivated

There are several possible reasons why donation of unwanted products is relatively popular:

- Convenience of donation (ACS, 2006);
- Wanting to support local charities or less fortunate people (Brook Lyndhurst, 2009c);
- Recognising the value of selling a product (Brook Lyndhurst 2009c); and
- Feeling responsible for a product (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Cooper, 2005b)

However, none of the studies reviewed here, or previously (cf. Brook Lyndhurst 2009c), revealed a strong link between reuse behaviours and environmental motivations.

Lack of awareness and confusion are key barriers to donation

While donation is seen as convenient for many products, research reveals that there remain reasons why some people do not donate products:

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16 For more information on quantifying the extent of reuse behaviours, please refer to WR1204 Household Waste Prevention Evidence Review L3 m3-1 (Brook Lyndhurst, 2009b, for Defra WREP)
17 See http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/business/products/roadmaps/clothing/
• Low visibility of reuse channels and lack of knowledge about options for donation or purchase (Brook Lyndhurst, 2009c).
• Perception of the quality required by reuse channels being too high and deterring donation (Fisher et al., 2008).
• Perception of the quality required by reuse channels being too low, leading to rejection of products offered for donation and subsequent consumer confusion (Brook Lyndhurst, 2009c).

Stigma is a barrier to second-hand purchase
Various literature sources also suggest that some consumers feel that there is a stigma attached to second-hand purchases (Brook Lyndhurst, 2009c). This is reflected by consumers being more willing to donate items for reuse than to purchase second-hand items themselves and in the different socio-demographic profile of the donators and purchasers of second-hand items.

However, the growth of internet exchange sites (such as Freecycle and eBay) may indicate a change in attitude towards the purchase of certain second-hand items amongst younger age groups in particular (Phillips, 2009; ACS, 2006).

3.6 Conclusion to the findings from the literature review
Overall, the literature reviewed shows that there may be considerable challenges to the successful uptake of longer lasting products. In particular, the need consumers feel to be ‘up to date’ combined with the perceived disposability of many items provide a potentially powerful barrier to the uptake and prolonged use of longer lasting products.

However, there are also a number of potential opportunities apparent from the findings reviewed. There is some evidence of a degree of responsibility felt by consumers towards some of their products (even if they don’t always act on these feelings). This is evident not only in the additional care they may take of certain products in use, but also in the way some consumers choose to dispose of some products into the second-hand economy.

It is possible that the literature has underrepresented consumer interest in the ‘lifetime’ as opposed to the ‘longer life’ of products, due to the complex and potentially hidden nature of consumer product expectations at the point of purchase. This is something we have sought to consider in further detail in our own primary research - the results of which are set out in the remaining sections of this report.
4 Overarching themes

This section provides the background context for the more product-specific, detailed discussion of the findings which follow in subsequent sections of the report. It contains a description of what is meant by ‘product lifetime’ and the implications of that definition for the presentation of material later in report.

4.1 What do we mean when we talk about a product’s lifetime?

4.1.1. Nature v nurture

Some manufacturers may know the expected functional lifetime of their products, based on an understanding of the design tolerances of those products. For example, a washing machine tested under factory conditions, may, on average, be expected to be reliable for a certain number of washes.

However, in the hands of any given consumer, the product is taken out of factory conditions and subjected to the vagaries of idiosyncratic, every day use. This idiosyncratic usage extends beyond differences in the levels of wear and tear products receive at the hands of different consumers, and also includes consumer judgements around when the product is ‘ready’ to be disposed of and even what happens to it once it has been disposed of.

For this reason, we have found it useful to think of products’ lifetimes as being determined by a combination of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’. A product’s nature being the inherent properties it has – its durability, functionality, reliability or overall quality or performance.

How a product is nurtured, or treated (throughout all stages of the products’ lifecycle) will, in conjunction with the nature of the product, determine how long that product lasts. As an illustration of this point, the annexes to this report contains a decision-tree diagram which traces the potential lifetime of a product, setting out the critical points at which that life could be ended, depending upon the different nurturing decisions taken by the consumer.

4.1.2. Categorising attitudes and products: up-to-date; workhorse and investment

Detailed analysis of the group discussions revealed that any given participant could hold a number of different, and at times competing, attitudes towards a product’s lifetime. However, that said, there also appeared to be distinctive themes in participants’ attitudes towards both the nature and nurture of different types of products (spanning the purchase, care and disposal stages of the product lifecycle), resulting in a range of different behaviours that in turn had differential impacts on products’ lifetimes.

Identifying these themes has allowed us to group products into categories defined by differences in participants attitudes and behaviour. We identified three sets of attitudes and behaviours that were typically displayed by participants and these will be used to frame the analysis in the rest of the report:
Up-to-date
Up-to-date attitudes were held by many of the participants in the groups towards products that were felt to be more important for their look than for their function. Participant ‘nurturing’ decisions took on far more significance for the lifetime of these products than the actual nature of the products themselves.

Specifically, products treated as ‘up-to-date products’ tended not to be discarded because they had broken down or worn out, but because participants perceived them to be ‘out of date’ and no longer sufficiently fashionable. The up-to-date mindset, and the behaviours and products associated with it are analysed in detail in section 5.

Workhorse
Workhorse attitudes placed far more emphasis on the nature of products. Such attitudes focussed on product functionality more than appearance, and lifetimes of workhorse products tended to end because the products had broken down. The workhorse mindset, behaviour and products associated with it are the subject of section 6 of the report.

Investment
We also identified a range of attitudes and behaviours in which nature and nurture combined in positive ways to prolong product lifetimes. Participants held an investment mindset in respect of both workhorse and up-to-date products. Such a mindset operated in respect of those products that participants, on an idiosyncratic basis, decided to ‘invest’ in. Section 7 discusses investment attitudes and products in detail.

It should be noted that because we have used attitude-led definitions and not product-led definitions for our analytical framework, a product which is treated as an up-to-date product by one participant may be treated as a workhorse product by another.

For the sake of clarity, where this difference between participants was apparent in group discussions, we have judged what the group consensus was in respect of that particular product and treated it in line with that consensus. For example, although most participants saw small kitchen appliances as workhorse products, some saw them as up-to-date products. They have therefore been dealt with in the workhorse section, but with a note to the effect that not all participants treated them with this mindset.
5 Up-to-date products

This section presents the findings on participants’ attitudes and behaviours towards the lifetime of up-to-date products by considering the following:

- The definition of ‘up-to-date products’;
- Participants’ understanding of the lifetime of up-to-date products;
- Participants’ attitudes towards up-to-date products;
- Participants’ motivations for the purchase of up-to-date products;
- How participants care for their up-to-date products;
- Participants’ motivations for the disposal of up-to-date products and the potential for giving such products a second life;
- The implications of the findings for policy.

5.1 Defining up-to-date products

As the name suggests, up-to-date products are those products which participants tended to discard when they were considered ‘out of date’. They were usually in perfectly good working order when discarded. On the whole, the only thing wrong with them in participants’ eyes was their dated appearance. This meant that for up-to-date products it tended to be the ‘nurture’ given to them by participants far more than their ‘nature’ which determined their lifetimes.

Most participants usually treated clothing, portable electronics and any items in their home that had the potential to affect its look with an ‘up-to-date mindset’. This meant that some furnishing products (particularly smaller, more visible accessories), and some home electronics are also included within the up-to-date category.

Even with electronic products, where an update brought functional as well as aesthetic change, the look of the function might have been at least as important to some participants as any added utility it offered.

For a few participants, particularly women in high income households, kitchen appliances and white goods were also seen as up-to-date products. However, most participants we spoke to thought of appliances and white goods as workhorse products, and for this reason they are discussed in section 6 below, rather than in this section on up-to-date items.

5.2 Expected lifetimes of up-to-date products

In order to frame and provide a reference point for the in depth discussions we asked participants how long they normally expected to use 30 specified products for before they gave them away, threw them away or sold them on. On the basis of that exercise and the discussions which followed we inferred that 14 of the 30 products were subject to an ‘up-to-date’ mindset.

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18 15 products for one half of participants, 15 for the other half
This section considers participants’ expectations in respect of the lifetimes of the 14 up-to-date products asked about, firstly at a general level and then at a level of more detail in terms of age, income and gender. The findings in respect of socio-demographic characteristics should be treated only as indicative, as the purpose of qualitative research is not to quantify the incidence of behaviours within population groups; which is something which would need to be tested further through quantitative research.

5.2.1. Average expected lifetimes

The table below sets out how long, on average, participants expected to use the up-to-date products that were asked about during the product lifetime sort exercise. For the following reasons, this list of products in the table is not in any way definitive, but merely indicative of the kind of products commonly treated as up-to-date products by participants in the groups:

- many more products within the clothing, portable electronics and home furnishing categories than appear here are likely to be thought of by participants as needing to be up-to-date;

- some group participants treated other products (for example, toasters and kettles) as up-to-date products. However, only those products considered up-to-date by the consensus of the group discussions have been included here;

- some group participants treated some of the products below as workhorse products. However those participants did not reflect the consensus of group discussions, which suggested that the following products were most commonly thought of as needing to be up-to-date.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Under 2 years</th>
<th>2-5 years</th>
<th>5-7 years</th>
<th>7-10 years</th>
<th>10-25 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shirt</td>
<td>Suit</td>
<td>Camera</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoes</td>
<td>MP3 player</td>
<td>Curtains</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Cushions</td>
<td>Television</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeans</td>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>Table lamp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a calculated average of expected product lifetimes based on the recorded views of the 115 participants within the qualitative groups. Group participants were not a fully representative sample of the UK population so the ‘average’ in the groups should not be interpreted as a statistically reliable average that applies to the population as a whole. It should be interpreted as a general indication of how long participants expected products to last and of relative expectations of lifetimes between different products.
The table shows quite clearly that up-to-date products did not have lengthy expected lifetimes. In fact, there were no average expectations of up-to-date products that were longer than seven years.

The short average expected lifetimes of even quite expensive electronic items may illustrate the powerful updating effect of the relationship between fashion and function. This was particularly apparent with respect to televisions. Many of the participants reported that the advent of flat screen TVs and continuing technological innovation is making them feel that replacement of their old TVs is unavoidable (and, in some cases, even replacement of their first generation flat screen LCD TV by a plasma, HD or 3D TV). This combination of fashion and function may be having a powerful effect on reducing the lifetime of up-to-date products and potentially even moving some products from being viewed generally as ‘workhorse’ to being seen as needing to be ‘up-to-date’. If, for example, our expected lifetime results are compared with Coopers and Mayers’ results from 2000, we see a reduction in the expected lifetime from 10 to seven years for televisions, two to four years for mobile phones and six to four years for computers.\textsuperscript{20} The attitudes and motivations that drive this apparently powerful need to be up to date are set out fully in section 5.3 below.

5.2.2. The detail behind the averages

The average expectations in the table above hide considerable differences, for some products more than others, between the maximum and minimum expected lifetimes of up-to-date products. The ‘tails’ on the bars on the chart below show the full range of expected lifetimes of up-to-date products as reported by the discussion group participants.

\textsuperscript{20} These results are not directly comparable due to different methodologies and different definitions of expected lifetimes. However, they may be very broadly indicative of change over time. See section 4 for a fuller discussion of the comparison between the two studies.
The obvious conclusion to draw from the maximum and minimum differences in expected lifetimes set out above is that being up-to-date is not equally important to everyone and/or to everyone for every type of product. Nor is it likely that ‘up-to-date’ is understood by everyone to mean the same thing.

As well as differences between individual participants, we also identified some broad differences in the expectations of different groups of participants by gender, age and income. It should be noted that these differences are indicative and not generalisable due to the qualitative nature of the research.

**Gender**

On the whole, women who participated in the group discussions had expectations for up-to-date products that were shorter than men’s. This was especially true for items of clothing and interior products. Participants from households where men and women lived together sometimes gave the impression of a division of control in purchasing different products. Men claimed to be ‘in charge’ of electronics and women saw themselves, and were seen, as being in charge of clothing and interiors.

Where gender divisions relating to purchases were noted by participants, they sometimes commented that a certain amount of trading might take place. Overall, this appeared to have the effect of escalating the ‘updating’ of products within the household, with, for example, the female partner encouraging the male partner to make a purchase of his choice, so that she was then ‘allowed’ a purchase of her choice, and vice versa.

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21 The numbers shown in this diagram are for illustrative purposes only and are not statistically reliable.
M: My wife tricks me, she uses it because she wants to decorate the house, the kitchen/diner, ‘well we could have a settee in here with a telly on the wall there with the Playstation for the kids and we could have a new telly in here.’ So she knows she is playing the TV to me and then she is going to get the decoration and the settee. I think I’ve won but actually I have probably lost!

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

These gender differences may be worth bearing in mind in terms of helping to understand the target audience for any potential communications aimed at increasing consumer understanding of product lifetimes (for more discussion on potential policy interventions see section 4.7 below).

Age

Overall, older participants did not expect to update products as frequently as younger participants. In general, most of the up-to-date products were generally expected to last for between one and a half to two years longer by the older age groups (45-65 and 65+) than by the younger age groups (18-25 and 26-39).

This may not sound like a significant difference in expectation. However, given the very short expected lifetimes of these up-to-date products and their subsequent high rates of churn, a couple of years’ extra lifetime may actually represent considerable resource efficiencies.

In some cases, the difference in lifetime expectations between age groups really was striking. The 66+ age group, for example, generally expected to use a table lamp for around 16 years, as opposed to six-years in younger groups (with variations around these general averages in both age groups). Suits also showed a big difference, with the youngest age group expecting to keep their suits for only around three years and the oldest expecting to keep theirs for around seven and a half years.

This difference in general lifetime expectations by age was borne out by comments made by older participants in the group discussions.

F: I think we have probably all been brought up by a generation of people who didn’t spend a lot on things like consumerism and we were expected to make things last....I am certainly different to my children, where value for money to me is still quite important and I do expect, like we all do, things to last... they are more of a throw away generation.

Group 9, Empty Nester, Higher income, Manchester

22 ‘Average’ in this instance is used very specifically to describe the results from the qualitative sort exercise on product lifetimes’ expectations. It is a calculated average of expected product lifetimes based on the recorded views of the 115 participants within the qualitative groups. Group participants were not a fully representative sample of the UK population so the ‘average’ in the groups should not be interpreted as a statistically reliable average that applies to the population as a whole. It should be interpreted as a general indication of how long participants expected products to last and of relative expectations of lifetimes between different products.

23 Please see caveat in footnote 22.
Grown-up children were sometimes reported as trying to exert pressure on their parents to update their products.

**F:** My son would, that would be more on the electrical sort of side, he would say: you need to update. You need to, you know, telephones or whatever, I need to update.

**Q:** Okay. Does anyone else have that - get told that they should change something?

**M:** Yes. I've got two daughters!

**M:** That is right, so have I. Every time they come in the house: ‘You have still got that?’

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Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

However, despite this, not all older participants were convinced of the ‘need’ to update every item. Mobile phones represented a particular case in point, with a number of mainly older participants suggesting that they only required the basic functions of the phone and were therefore satisfied with their phones and did not want to update them.

This contrasts with the replacement of C.R.T televisions with newer, flat screen models, which some older participants said that they had bought, again, sometimes with involvement from their children.

These findings on age may indicate that interventions aimed at slowing the churn of up-to-date products amongst younger consumers have the potential for the greatest impact on resource efficiency.

**Income**

Overall, people on lower incomes seemed to expect some of the more expensive products asked about to last slightly longer than did those on higher incomes.

Up-to-date products with notable differences in expected use by income included televisions and suits. These were all likely to be relatively expensive products within their categories, and may therefore have represented something of an ‘investment’ purchase for those on lower incomes (for more on which, see section 7 below).

**M:** It’s the investment factor, isn’t it? You bring so much in, you want as much from that as you’ve put in as possible –

**F:** Yes.

**M:** And the more you get from it, the better the value of it.

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Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry

However, this is not to suggest that people on lower incomes did not share the same values and attitudes as other participants towards product replacement. The desire to update in terms of fashion and technology was particularly evident across all income bands, but it may have been that participants on lower incomes were simply not able to afford to do this quite so frequently as the others.

**M:** I would change everything today if I could.

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Group 7, Family, Lower income, London
This points to the power of disposable income as one of the key factors in enabling consumers to update products and therefore also to reduce product lifetimes, a finding that echoes Tim Cooper’s earlier analysis (Cooper, 2005b). It also underscores the importance for policy and interventions, in the first instance, of ensuring that longer life products really do offer better consumer value, and then in the second instance of convincing consumers, particularly lower income consumers, of the reality of that value.

To understand better the potential that may exist for creating policies and interventions around up-to-date products, it is necessary to develop a more detailed understanding of participants’ attitudes towards those products.

5.3 Attitudes to up-to-date products

This section considers participants’ attitudes towards up-to-date products in terms of those attitudes which appear to drive the urge to update, and those attitudes which may go some way to restraining the updating of products. These attitudes underpin the specific motivations and behaviours around purchasing, care in use and disposal of products covered in the sections 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6 that follow below.

5.3.1. Attitudes that drive updating

The strength of feeling underpinning attitudes to up-to-date products should not be underestimated. Findings from the discussion groups vividly illustrate the power of consumer culture and its deep-rootedness in individuals’ sense of well being. In particular, the groups provide ample further evidence of the profound relationship between consumers’ status, identity and feelings of social belonging and how this relationship plays out in their consumption patterns.24

The power of consumerism and the powerlessness of the consumer

Overall, the findings on up-to-date products seem to reinforce this understanding of ‘I am what I buy’ for most participants in the discussion groups. Take, for example, the following quote:

F: My old telly is still sitting in my bedroom staring at me, I hate it. I hate it with a passion.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

Presumably, like many millions of other consumers in the UK who have recently discarded working CRT televisions,25 the woman who made the above statement had once chosen, been excited about and paid for the television that she now ‘hates with a passion’.


Consumption and its relationship with social status, identity and belonging is also widely discussed in the literatures on sociology and social anthropology (for example, the work of Professor Daniel Miller or Professor Elizabeth Shove).

25 Defra have projected that more than 22 million televisions will be discarded between 2006 and 2010 on the basis of the changeover to digital alone. This figure would presumably be much greater were it also to include those who have discarded their televisions for purely aesthetic reasons.

The appearance of up-to-products was seen by many as being of paramount importance in reflecting their own self-image, either through how they looked personally or how, by extension, their home looked (although as discussed above (section 5.2.2) the importance of this varied by person and by product).

This was apparent during group discussions of all up-to-date products. However, the importance of being seen to be up-to-date was thrown into sharp relief by discussions over home interiors. Here, the distinction between products that were on display (and therefore had the opportunity to say something to others about the householder) and products that were less visible, was clearly drawn.

F: I think if something’s going to be on show all the time, like - I only bought my new DVD player because it matched the TV and it looked pretty, and it was this big, and it was white... But that’s going to be on show all the time - sitting in my lounge. If there was a washing machine that did exactly the same but it wasn’t quite as pretty, and it’s like in my kitchen, it’s under the sink and no one’s really going to see it - if it was a hundred quid cheaper but it wasn’t as rounded on the corner, I’d get the squarer one.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

For such visible products, the look could trump almost every other consideration to quite a significant degree. Some participants were prepared to pay more and even to buy a worse product in every objective, measurable sense of the word ‘worse’, just to get the all-important look.

M: I went for the black one [television] even though I would have preferred the white one. Even though I knew I was paying more for a white finish. That is virtually all it was - the same spec just white.
Q: And what if the white one is going to last a lot less time?
M: Yeah I still would get the white one. I know it’s very shallow.

Group 1, Living with parents, London

Accompanying some participants’ explanations of their need to look a certain way was a sense that there was absolutely nothing they could do about it. This amounted to a feeling of resignation or helplessness encapsulated by the phrase, “there is nothing you can do” (male, group 5, family, higher income, Bristol).

The attraction of consumption and the absence of guilt over purchases

For other participants, either generally or only for certain purchases, it was more a case of wanting to consume rather than having to consume. A whole-hearted embrace of materialism and enjoyment of the pleasure it gave, meant that for some participants, the high turnover of up-to-date products was not necessarily seen as a bad thing.

Many participants clearly enjoyed the process of ‘updating’. They appeared to feel positive about their replacement purchases, and some directly commented that they had no bad feelings, specifically no feelings of guilt about their new purchases.
**Q:** Things that you throw away that are still in working condition, do you feel guilty about that at all or does it not bother you?

**M:** It is more about the new one I think.

**F:** Yes.

**M:** Bring the new one in. You’re excited.

**F:** If you are going to part with that amount of money you’ve already made your mind up anyway.

In fact, there were very few direct references made to negative feelings over the replacement of up-to-date products and several denials of ‘guilt’ or ‘feeling bad’, when participants were asked directly.

One potential explanation for the absence of guilt or other negative feelings around the purchase of updated products is the clear social norm around the disposable nature of products (see, for example Cooper (2005b)).

The concept of the ‘throwaway society’ or the ‘disposable society’ was familiar to many participants and was often raised, unprompted, in group discussions. Some participants felt annoyed by the ‘throwaway society’ (dealt with in section 5.3.2 below). However, most participants saw the purchase of replacement products (when there was ‘nothing wrong’ with the existing item) as something that ‘society’ did. This appeared to have the effect of absolving the need to feel any personal guilt over up-to-date product purchases.

**F:** And now society’s way of thinking is that everything is disposable.

**Failing to plan ahead and impulse buying**

Some participants’ lack of pre-purchase planning or their tendency to impulse buy led them to purchase goods that they soon realised they didn’t want. This tendency was particularly apparent in relation to kitchen gadgets and clothing, but it also applied to a range of other, possibly quite expensive products.

**Q:** Just tell me something that you threw away that was in a usable condition when you threw it away.

**M:** A coffee table.

**F:** I was going to say, I’ve put down coffee table as well...

**M:** Just too big and in the way, we didn’t use it. I don’t drink coffee so, I mean I don’t put anything on it. If I have a drink I put it down next to me.

**Q:** How long had you had it for?

**M:** Six months, seven months.

**Q:** Okay. So it just didn’t work. What about you?

**F:** It was just getting in the way and the dog was just chewing the sides. So, we’d only had it like a month as well and it was just taking up too much room, so we just got rid of it.
5.3.2. Attitudes that may restrain updating

Although the urge to update may have been powerful for most participants we spoke to for at least some of the products they bought, it was not entirely unfettered. We also identified a number of attitudes that may have been restraining the rate of product updating, and these are set out below.

‘Waste not want not’ - a social norm?

In general within the groups, attitudes towards waste appeared to reflect what may be a norm which said that it was all right to replace products as long as you disposed of your unwanted items to a good home. Participants told us that the thought of throwing ‘perfectly good’ products away made them feel guilty.

F:  I like to think that something has gone to a good home. It makes me feel better.

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

However, it was unclear whether people avoided waste to the extent claimed, or whether there was a ‘social desirability’ effect in the groups whereby people did not want to be heard admitting to wasteful behaviour. If the latter is true (and based on waste data it would be our hypothesis that it is true), then the norm to ‘waste not want not’ may have been more of an injunctive norm (though a weak one). That is to say it was something people thought they should do rather than something they actually did in practice.26

Even those who were prepared to admit that they weren’t ‘doing the right thing’ around disposal, still appeared to acknowledge that their behaviour may not generally be considered acceptable.

F:  I always take everything to the tip. I am awful really.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

It is also important to note that feelings of guilt associated with waste often stopped there. On the whole, the guilt did not appear to extend to any connected replacement purchase. However, comments by some of the participants gave us pause for thought and led us to question the apparent lack of connection between purchase and waste behaviours in participants’ minds.

Q:  Rather than chucking them out? Okay. You would pass them on to friends/family?....

F:  Then it justifies buying the next one, doesn’t it?

F:  Yes.

Group 6, Family, Lower income, Newcastle

If, as the participant in the quote above is suggesting, there is indeed a link between the purchase and disposal of up-to-date products in consumers’ minds (rather than merely using the disposal as a justification of the purchase after the event), then this would be of significant interest for understanding consumer behaviour in relation to resource efficiency in the round.

26 Disposal behaviours are explored in more detail in the second stage of the research - Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items, for Defra.
However, our findings do not allow us to say with any certainty whether people who expressed a strong dislike of waste were any more likely to make fewer replacement purchases, or whether they simply hoarded or tried to ‘rehouse’ more of their unwanted items in order to avoid being ‘wasteful’. This is an issue which will be taken up again in more detail in section 5.6.1 below and is an issue which would benefit from further research.

**Feeling under pressure to keep up appearances**

As set out above, it was the case that some participants were less enthusiastic than others about updating, and some even described feeling trapped by the pressure to be up to date.

> F: *There are wants and there are needs because you can get trapped in this because you can be forever upgrading, upgrading.*  

*Group 7, Family, Lower income, London*

Participants often reported strategies that they had developed to minimise the pressure of updating by changing just a few key items in their wardrobes or their homes. Although this meant that some items were regularly updated, this behaviour had the effect of keeping other larger, more costly items in use for longer. As mentioned above in the section above, participants sometimes restricted themselves to updating the look of only those rooms on show. For other rooms in the house they may have adopted a more functional attitude.

> F: *We've got a sofa bed in one of my bedrooms now and I don't think we will ever change that because that is there, it doesn't get used very often and it does what it is supposed to do and there is no reason to change it because nobody sees it as such.*  

*Group 5, Family, Higher income, Bristol*

A similar approach was taken by some participants in terms of their clothes, with cheaper, more visible items such as T-shirts and accessories being replaced to update an entire look, meaning that the replacement of other items could be avoided.

> M: *I do change my t-shirts quite often because I like having different t-shirts and that changes your look a lot. So you can keep your same jeans or your same combats or whatever and just by changing your t-shirts it makes it look like new all the time.*  

*Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry*

This suggests the possibility of a strategy that would actually encourage consumers to update some items with the overt aim of keeping other (and more) items in use for longer. Again, the issue of consumer value would have to underpin any such approach and the durability of the longer-lasting items would have to be sufficient to withstand longer use.

**Dislike of our throwaway society**

A few participants gave the impression that they felt as though they were different to others in terms of not updating their products to the same degree as others. They sometimes made a point of saying that they rejected the idea of needing to ‘update’ as opposed to merely being trapped by it.
While we cannot claim that this amounts to a cultural critique of trends towards disposability (Cooper, 2005b), we did notice that these participants set themselves apart from the majority and did not always participate easily in the group discussions. We also noticed that such participants appeared in all groups, regardless of age, gender or income and we suspect therefore that they could be segmented in a different way.27

M: We’ve had stuff that lasts forever because we don’t use it very much, perhaps my wife won’t get a new one until the other one is broken but we spend money to get things fixed and maintain them rather than get rid of it because a newer one has come out.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

It should be stressed that such an attitude was clearly in the minority and was noticeably different to the mainstream of group opinion.

The fact that only a few individuals appeared to reject the urge to update products to any significant degree is borne out by the findings set out in the remainder of this section of the report which looks in turn at what motivated participant purchases of up-to-date products, how participants took care of up-to-date products, and how they disposed of them.

5.4 Purchasing up-to-date products

Having described how long participants expected to use up-to-date products for and the kinds of attitudes that lay behind those expectations, this section turns to look at how those attitudes and expectations informed the judgments that participants made when they purchased up-to-date products.

5.4.1. The relative importance of up-to-date product’s lifetimes in participants’ purchasing decisions

The findings discussed here stem from the purchase motivations sort exercise that we asked participants to perform in men’s and women’s breakout groups. This section looks specifically at the findings from that exercise and the group discussions surrounding it with respect to those groups that were asked to consider clothing, interiors and electronics (i.e. those products most often viewed as up-to-date products).

We found that during the sort exercise, participants tended to ‘bundle’ motivations into groups of roughly similar importance. For up-to-date products overall, the bundle of motivations considered most important included the following:

- quality;
- value for money;
- price;
- how well it performs/functionality;
- how long a product lasts;
- aesthetics/style.

27 The Defra segmentation model may yield some interesting results in terms of this kind of attitude, however, as we did not recruit to that model we cannot provide any firm analytical judgements on its applicability.
The group discussions around purchase motivations illustrated that concepts describing the nature of products, such as ‘quality’, ‘how well it performs’ and ‘how long it lasts’ were all seen relative to price and that achieving a good price for the nature of any given product was seen as the best possible outcome. That outcome was good value for money.

Within this value equation, ‘how long it lasts’ was a relative concept and should not be confused with ‘long-lasting’ or ‘durable’. From the participant’s perspective for up-to-date products, what it really appeared to mean was, “how long do I want it to last before I choose to update it? I don’t want it to break before then or it will represent poor value for money” - as the following quote illustrates.

M: I would like them to last as long as till I decide to chuck them out and change them with something else. I don’t want it thrown upon me, you know. I know I am going to change my computer in two years for a better performing one but I don’t want the other one to break down before that. I want to be given the choice.

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

It was very clear that ‘how long a product lasts’ for up-to-date products did not therefore translate into participant interest in longer lasting products or product durability (with some exceptions when up-to-date products were treated with an investment mindset, which is discussed further in section 7). It was generally only about getting value for money at the price paid – and for some of the very low priced up-to-date items (particularly clothing) this could translate into very short lifetimes being seen as perfectly acceptable.

M: ...socks, t-shirts things like that... Just cheap, throwaway.

Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry

However, the fact that participants considered product lifetimes at all for up-to-date products is worthy of note. It means that there may be a hook – admittedly a small one – for interventions that may prolong the lifetime of such products. That hook would appear to be consumer value.

If consumers were able to get the look that they wanted, perhaps through updating only parts of the product (be it an update of technological function or simply of appearance), and this was demonstrably less expensive and therefore better value than replacing products, then there may be the potential to stretch the lifetimes of up-to-date products to some extent.

Of course, this possibility raises a number of questions concerning, for example:

- the resource efficiency benefits of partial updating over complete replacements;
- the nature of the contracts that consumers enter into (largely in the case of mobile phone providers) and;
- the suitability of products to being updated (raising issues of product durability and design).

These questions would require further detailed investigation, but from the consumer perspective at least, there appears to be some (albeit limited) potential for lengthening the
lifetimes of some up-to-date products. This will be discussed further in the conclusions and implications section below (5.7).

5.5 Taking care of up-to-date products

This section considers how participants treated the up-to-date products they owned, to see if they took any responsibility themselves for maintaining products and preventing breakdown. It may be possible to learn from such ‘care strategies’ to identify specific opportunities where participants could be given greater support to keep products in use for longer. The discussion below looks at how group participants took care of such products in general, how warranties were used to care for up-to-date products and whether such products were repaired when broken.

5.5.1. General caring behaviours

It would be easy to make the assumption that participants did not treat up-to-date products with care, simply because they did not expect to keep to them for long. However, whilst it was true that some participants described what would be considered as careless behaviour, generally speaking, many participants appeared to take at least some care of even relatively inexpensive and short-lived products.

By and large, up-to-date products were not disposed of because they were broken, but because of their outdated look. This in itself may go some way to supporting the claim that they were kept in reasonable condition until they were updated.

General caring behaviours described by participants included:

- using protective cases for portable electronic items;
- running down rechargeable batteries before charging them again;
- keeping electronic products in safe places where they were less likely to get accidentally damaged;
- complying with care instructions on clothing labels.

As described above, participants wanted up-to-date products to last as long as they wanted them to last, and this was reflected in the way participants’ ‘nurtured’ up-to-date products: even though their lives may have been short, up-to-date products still had a job to do.

This was in some measure related to the cost of updating. Although many up-to-date products might have been relatively inexpensive, not all were, and for these more expensive items such as some electronic, clothing and interior items, the cost of being up-to-date meant that care needed to be taken to keep them looking good until they went out of date.

It was also the case that the breakage of some up-to-date items could represent a major inconvenience to participants. This was particularly true for electronic items and will be discussed further in the following section on warranties.

These findings on general levels of care may go some way to supporting the analysis made in respect of the findings around participant motivations for the purchase of products, and suggests that there may indeed be potential to give consumers options to keep their up-to-date products in use for longer – so long as value for money and the ability to remain up-to-date are not compromised.
5.5.2. Using warranties to prolong the life of up-to-date products

Apart from electronic items, not many up-to-date products are routinely covered by warranties. This sub-section therefore only considers the use of warranties to extend the lifetime of electronic products.

On the whole, participants did not report positive experiences of using warranties to extend the lifetimes of their electronic products. In fact, they were often particularly annoyed about such products breaking down in the first place, which may in large part have been connected to the recurring theme of expectations for up-to-date products being based upon participants wanting them to last as long as they wanted them to last.

This meant that participants expected their electronic items, particularly relied upon items such as mobiles and laptops, to be highly reliable over a short period – and if they did happen to break down participants wanted the problem to be sorted out quickly and conveniently.

For some of the participants in our groups, warranties on up-to-date electronics did not seem to be delivering the desired level of service. For example, some participants reported that they felt there was an inordinate amount of red tape in making a claim, and with that, considerable inconvenience and loss of utility.

M: Like that girl mentioned with a phone. Now, I had an N97 about seven months ago, used it for a month, sent it off to get fixed through the insurance and they have sent me like about twenty questions which I’ve got to fill in. They’re asking for blah, blah, blah. So I’ve paid six months for a phone which I haven’t even seen really, you know?

Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry

In one extreme example, although the participant had an operational warranty, he refused to even attempt to use the warranty repair service, instead paying for a private repair for his laptop, so as to have it back in use as soon as possible.

M: Car warranties are good - but warranties on mobile phones, laptops. We had a new laptop for Christmas, it went at the start of this month so it is not even a month old and we took it to a private repairer because we didn’t want it sent off for weeks on end. I knew I could take it to him, two days and he would give it me back, yes, a hundred quid instead of waiting without a computer.

Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry

This participant’s experience was an extreme example of a more general feeling noted by others of not wanting to be ‘without’ products which were relied on to perform everyday functions while they were being repaired (this was particularly true of laptops and mobiles).

These findings indicate that there may be substantial scope for improving the functioning of warranties for up-to-date electronic products. Such improvements may be of particular importance if interventions are developed to encourage consumers to keep their electronic
products for longer, as longer product lifetimes may bring the issue of product reliability into sharper focus.

5.5.3. Repairing up-to-date products

Even though on the whole participants did not own up-to-date products for long enough to break them, those up-to-date products that did break and that were not under guarantee, were generally not considered worth repairing by participants. This was certainly true for cheaper items of clothing and interiors, but also true for more expensive items such as televisions. Given the high levels of churn of up-to-date products, this finding is perhaps hardly surprising.

Apart from the obvious lack of drivers for the repair of up-to-date products (i.e. they would soon need to be updated in any event), participants pointed to a significant barrier in the form of the cheap cost of replacement products.

\[ M: \text{ They're selling televisions in Morrisons for two hundred and fifty five pounds, for flatscreens, thirty two inch, two hundred and fifty five pounds. Well if you have had a television over five years and the guarantee is finished, it is just not worth repairing. I'd probably just go and buy a new one.} \]

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

The only kind of repair behaviour that was at all common across the groups that discussed up-to-date products, was that of shoe repair. However, even in this case the behaviour was not widespread and amongst those who practiced it, it was likely to be applied only to valued or valuable pairs of shoes. This links to the ‘investment mindset’ discussed in section 7 below.

Even very simple repairs that some participants would have been able to carry out themselves at virtually no cost, such as the minor repair of clothing, were rarely discussed. In fact, for clothing in general (including shoes), most participants reported that on the whole, they did not need to consider repairs because they had so many alternatives available to them at any one time. This again points to the high rate of product churn and of ‘nurture’ more often than ‘nature’ deciding the lifetime of up-to-date products.

\[ M: \text{ We have lots of shoes. So you don’t wear one pair of shoes until they wear out... I mean I’ve got some shoes that I’ve had for a while that I might wear once in a blue moon.} \]

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

The high volumes owned, light use and short lifetimes of up-to-date products meant that although product repair was not often talked about in group discussions, giving unwanted but ‘perfectly good’ products a second life often was, and this may be where the greatest potential lies for intervening in the consumer product lifecycle of up-to-date products.
5.6 The second life of up-to-date products

As set out in section 5.3.2 above, group discussions revealed a potential social norm (though probably only an injunctive norm) around it being wrong to waste ‘perfectly good’ products. As a consequence, participants were often keen to talk about their experiences of trying to find a ‘good home’ for their unwanted up-to-date products. This section considers that behaviour by examining the second life of up-to-date products.

There was also some discussion in the groups around the purchase of second-hand products. However, doing justice to this topic would have required a separate research project. As it was, the context of the group discussions did not lend themselves well to encouraging openness about the purchase of second-hand goods. The brevity of the findings in the sub-section below on ‘demand’ reflects this fact.

However, before the discussion of the supply and demand of second life products takes place, there is an intermediate stage between the first owner’s use of a product and any potential second life: storage.

5.6.1. Storing and hoarding behaviours and their effects

Participants in the groups often identified themselves as either ‘hoarders’ or ‘non-hoarders’. This section considers the behaviour of the ‘hoarders’.

There were many accounts of participants using sheds, lofts, garages, cellars and cupboards to store unwanted, unbroken products that they considered to be out of date. How long items stayed in storage and what happened to them once they came out of storage revealed that storing items may be acting as a barrier to giving products a viable second life. Hoarding may be especially problematic where up-to-date products are concerned because the longer they are kept in storage the likelihood increases that they will become outdated in the eyes of other potential owners.

Some items were stored in the hope that they might be useful at some point in the future – keeping hold of things ‘just in case’. This confirms other findings on the importance of the claimed potential reuse as a motivation for keeping things in storage (Cooper and Mayers, 2000). The word potential is italicised here because, as the following discussion will reveal, whether such items really did come in useful at any point, was questionable.

Q:  Why do you put them in there [the shed] rather than any other location?

M:  Get them out of the way, really.

M:  - in case the new one broke, you can just bring it in -

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

Those participants in group discussions who self-identified as hoarders sometimes admitted that when they did have a clear out, they were unlikely to give the items that had been kept in storage a second life.

28 A fresh wave of research has subsequently been undertaken to look at this issue in the context of the reuse of bulky products more widely. Please see Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items, for Defra.
F: I think if you just have a clear out, if you have got a bag, everything goes in it. You don’t actually care if it is electrical or glasses or clothes or anything and you know you are getting rid of it and it is gone and you don’t actually give it a thought.

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

Some participants, however, did say that they tried to give some of their stored items to charity. However, the length of time that such items may have been in storage and the condition of the storage environment, could both contribute to significant depreciation in the value of the item to any subsequent owner, particularly where up-to-date products are concerned.

These findings indicate the potential for interventions aimed at encouraging people to dispose of unwanted up-to-date products into the second life economy at a faster rate. However, we would suggest that further research be carried out into any relationship between rates of consumption and propensity to hoard/store products (discussed in section 5.3 above). For example, if hoarding were to slow down replacement consumption for any reason then it may not be wise to encourage ‘purging’ of stored items. We cannot tell from the present research what, if any, impact hoarding has on the rate of replacement consumption or product churn. The supply of second-hand products

**Disposing of products through informal reuse networks**

Not everyone stored unwanted up-to-date products to the point that they became waste. Many participants described successfully passing products on to family and friends. This tended to happen most successfully around the time that the new, replacement product was purchased.

There appeared to be a pecking order described by some in terms of who was offered what, described by one participant as a ‘food chain’. Furnishing items, televisions, and good quality clothing were most frequently mentioned as the kind of products that were passed on in this way.

M: I never put stuff in the tip. It always goes down the food chain. Goes to my sister first, then it goes to my mum and dad. If they don’t want it then my friends get offered it, if they don’t want it –

M: Yes I try that as well.

Q: So what sorts of things do you do that for?

M: TV. When we got the flat screen, the big TV went to my nephew.

M: Sofas I do it with. Get rid of a sofa generally somebody wants a sofa.

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

In many instances the charity shop was seen as the penultimate resort and then – but only if all else failed - the unwanted product would be taken to the tip.
F: Well my grand-daughter got the three piece suite. Another grandson got two beds. Someone else got a television. Chairs and other things went to the tip, nobody wanted it.

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

This quote also illustrates that there was often an age hierarchy, with younger family members who might have only just been setting up home, being given larger products that were no longer wanted. This corresponds with the discussions in the younger aged groups where participants often talked about being the recipients of such hand-me-downs.

It is worth noting that participants who gave away unbroken items to family or friends often described the items as having ‘nothing wrong with them’ or being ‘perfectly good’. This appeared to signify self awareness by participants that they were discarding something that was in working order, simply for reasons of updating. They fully expected someone who was either less fashion conscious, or who had less disposable income to take their unwanted items.

F: Yes. If you spend a hundred/two hundred quid on a pair of curtains, I don’t want to just throw them out because I redecorate the room. I might use that in another house or in another room.

F: Yes.
F: You know, because they are perfectly good. As you say they don’t wear out.
F: It is just the fashion.
M: Yes. Or you give them to a family member and see them being used.
F: Yes. Or a friend or whatever.

Group 5, Family, Higher income, Bristol

This links back to the discussion around attitudes to up-to-date products and feelings of guilt around disposal. However, there is a question mark over whether there were many willing recipients for unwanted items or whether some participants simply thought there ought to have been. This point is considered further under the issue of demand for second-hand products below.

Selling unwanted up-to-date products

Some participants from most groups had experience of selling items on eBay or at car boot sales. Sometimes there appeared to be quite strong divisions between those who loved selling their second hand goods because they made good money and those who hated it because they found it too much hassle for the return involved.

This division in attitudes towards selling did not appear to break down along income lines, but rather along the lines of more personal attitudes relating to value and subjective ideas of what a good return on the time invested might be, as the two contrasting quotes below illustrate.

F: I won’t do them [car boot sales] anymore because people are arguing over fifty pence. I am like, have it. I ended up
just giving most of it away. I am not standing arguing over fifty pence. Just have it.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

M: Your rubbish is always someone else’s gold and this came home to me, I’ve only done one car boot. I took a load of stuff in the car, took it to a car boot, all priced up and most of it went.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

However, none of the participants we spoke to were so enthusiastic about selling on their unwanted items that it affected how well they took care of them in use. We asked participants directly if they might take particular care of a product if they thought it would later be sold or passed on. They almost exclusively told us that, no, thoughts of disposal tended not to enter their heads until the time came to get rid of a product. Only at that point would they consider whether any item was ‘good enough’ to be given the opportunity of a second life (if this was something they wanted to do).

M: I don’t buy something thinking about what I am going to do with it when I get rid of it. It’s when I decide to get rid of it, that’s when I decide what I am going to do with it.

Group 9, Empty Nester, Higher income, Manchester

These findings suggest that for some participants at least, giving their unwanted items a second life by selling them on is an attractive option. Others, however, may be temperamentally disinclined to sell their own unwanted products and from the comments made in the groups, seem unlikely to be persuaded of the benefits of selling their unwanted items. Overall, this points to the somewhat limited potential for intervening in the sale of such goods with a view to prolonging product lifetimes. Rather it would appear to be something best left to personal inclination and market forces, with policy instead focussing on other methods for product reuse, such as making channels for charitable donation better understood and more effective.

Making charitable donations

Most participants claimed that they gave at least some unwanted up-to-date products to charity, particularly clothes. The most usual means of charitable donation amongst group participants was through charity shop outlets. Not many had heard of alternative channels such as furniture reuse organisations and Freecycle, and fewer still had used them.

Q: Do you use Freecycle as well?
F: I haven’t personally used it but I gave my daughter stuff to use because you have to exchange. So she has used stuff of mine to trade-in so she can get stuff off Freecycle.

Q: Okay. Has anyone used Freecycle?
M: I haven’t even heard of it.
F: No. I haven’t heard of that either.

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle
There were also women participants in two of the groups who did not like the idea of inviting strangers into their homes to take their unwanted items away, which put them off using channels such as Freecycle.

**F:** No. I would give anyone anything free but I wouldn’t like a stranger coming round the house and taking something in case they were having a look to see what you’ve got.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

Participants reported different experiences with different types of product when they came to make charitable donations, and these are worth considering separately as they throw up different opportunities and barriers for the second lives of up-to-date products.

**Clothing**
Participants said that clothing was most commonly donated to charity. This is consistent with other research that has found people primarily report that they dispose of unwanted clothing through donations to charity shops, kerbside sacks provided by charities or clothing banks (Fisher et al., 2008).29

However, in line with the earlier ‘food chain’ finding, the quality of donations to charity might have been not have been the best, once the most desirable items had been cherry-picked by family and friends, or even sold off.

**F:** But for me charity begins at home. So I give the clothes to friends and what I have got left over I give to Oxfam. I never chuck it in the bin.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

However, not all participants considered everything to be suitable to give to charity shops, and operated on the basis that if it was not good enough for them then it was unlikely to be good enough for anyone else. Amongst participants who expressed this view there did not seem to be any awareness that textiles which were unsuitable for reuse could be remanufactured.

**Electrical goods**
Some participants reported having wanted to give electrical goods to charity shops. Several complained that charity shops had refused to take their donations – health and safety was given as the reason. There were also several instances of people trying to give away their ‘old’ C.R.T televisions to charity shops, but having been turned away.

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29 Claims made in discussion groups tend to be at odds with the amount of clothing and textiles actually recovered for reuse, which amounts to only a quarter of the total according to research for Defra’s sustainable clothing road map. This points to the strength of the social desirability effect noted earlier in our report. http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/business/products/roadmaps/clothing/documents/reuse-recycling.pdf
F: They [charity shops] don’t take electrical stuff.
F: Somebody had a television, when they changed the television, rung Martlets\textsuperscript{30} up: would you like the television? They said - is it a flat screen? They said no, and they didn’t want it and it had freeview built into the television.
M: Terrible isn’t it?
F: And they didn’t want it and it was only four years old you know.

---

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

This draws attention to the fact that not all products may be suitable candidates for a second life. In this instance participants were claiming that demand for second-hand, non-flat screen televisions had collapsed.

Whether there is any possibility at all for creating a second life for hard-to-give-away electrical items, would require further focussed consideration. It may be more productive here to ensure that consumers are fully aware of take-back arrangements and collection options for both small and large waste electronic and electrical items (WEEE). WRAP has developed and trialled communications materials and interventions to support the capture of small WEEE (for recycling or reuse) and is exploring ways that more items can be captured for reuse generally.

Furniture

Furniture reuse outlets were known about and liked by a few of the participants in the groups when furnishings were discussed. In particular, such participants favoured organisations which came to remove unwanted furniture.

F: For bigger pieces of furniture I normally use Emmaus rather than Martlets because they are near me and they come with a big van to take it away.
M: That’s the main thing for me if someone can take it away it saves me having to do it myself and it’s an added bonus.

---

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

However, as with donations to charity shops, not all participants’ donations had been accepted. Once again, the issue of ‘health and safety’ was raised as a barrier to disposing of items into the second-hand economy, in this instance because of the need for materials to be fire retardant.

\textsuperscript{30} A locally well-known hospice shop with a branch in Brighton. http://www.themartlets.org.uk/
F: I just can’t believe that somebody somewhere couldn’t have used this table and chairs. Table, six chairs and a sideboard and where do you go to try and get rid of it? Nobody wants them.

F: The Community Furniture\(^3\)\(^1\) collect things.

M: Well, as long as it is not flammable.

F: They wouldn’t touch it because they had fabric on the seats.

F: No, no. I agree about the fire, if they are not fire resistant that is, yes –

M: That is law.

---

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

Again this raises the issues of whether, and if so how, such services could be improved to make use of a wider range of products. It also suggests that there is significant scope to inform consumers about their (local) options for giving a second life to items from the full range of product categories. These issues are explored in more detail in the second stage of research - Brook Lyndhurst (2011), *Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items*, for Defra.

### 5.6.2. Demand for second-hand products

This sub-section considers first of all those participants who were prepared to buy (or perhaps more accurately prepared to talk about buying) second-hand products. It then looks at examples of participants who discussed being recipients of others’ unwanted ‘hand-me-downs’.

**Buying second-hand products**

The impression from the discussion groups is inconclusive about the kinds of products that people would be prepared to buy second hand, with high levels of variation between individuals. Children’s clothes and shoes were perhaps the most popular items (especially via eBay), but CDs, DVDs and books were also discussed as potentially good second-hand purchases.

F: **It [eBay] is good to buy kids shoes from because of how quickly they grow out of them at this age, and before they are crawling or walking, before they are walking as such, you don’t get a lot of damage on them but they have grown out of them. So you could go and buy a brand new pair of Clarks shoes or pretty much brand new for ten quid as opposed to thirty in the shop and that is, you know, ideal.**

---

Group 5, Family, Higher income, Bristol

Several of the younger participants had also bought second-hand games and second-hand game consoles.

M: **I think actually I have bought a second hand Play Station. Some time ago. That was a little bit cool because you get a**

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\(^3\)\(^1\) A national social enterprise with a brand in Newcastle: http://www.communitytransport.org/locations/newcastle/
warranty from the actual organisation to bring it back.
And the same insurances as with new products.

Group 1, Living with parents, London

Some participants discussed buying clothes from charity shops, but they tended to be older participants. However, in these discussions there was a tendency to be somewhat defensive, as though anticipating that others might be judging them unfavourably because they bought from charity shops.

M: It’s the best place to go now - no shame in going into a charity shop...and depending where the charity shops are, there’s sometimes some good quality stuff in them.

Group 11, Empty Nester, Lower income, Bristol

Our relatively scant findings on buying second hand products is a reflection of at least two separate influences: the unwillingness of participants to discuss such matters in a group setting; and the reportedly greater tendency for people to donate rather than to buy second-hand goods (ACS, 2006). On this basis we do not feel able to draw any firm conclusions or implications for policy in relation to the purchase of second-hand products.

Receiving second-hand goods

We found that there were three main life situations described by those participants who were able to talk about receiving second hand products.

The first was of those young participants who were setting up home. In this instance it was common for them to see the ‘hand me downs’ as only temporary until they could afford something ‘better’.

M: Well this is it, everyone is setting up at the minute, aren’t they? Everyone is just, you know, a few of our friends are just coming out of Uni, you know? We’ve got people just moving in houses and stuff and we obviously got rid of the beanbag and stuff. It feels nice because they’ve got nothing and they really appreciate it and it will do until you can, because we had the same situation when we were first moving in, people were helping us by giving us stuff like a bed and things until we could afford what we wanted.

Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry

This raises the issue of the length, and in resource efficiency terms, value, of the second life of some products: a short second life may not represent much of an environmental benefit. This is something that would require further consideration and modelling, to assess overall environmental benefits. It would also be something that could usefully be considered in relation to the issue of hoarding and guilt around waste and whether there was any connection between the easy ‘off-loading’ of guilt and the rate of product churn (see section 5.3.2 above).

The second life situation which appeared to lead participants to receiving unwanted items from others was that of having young children. They tended to receive second-hand children’s clothes, shoes and sometimes nursery items from friends and family.
Thirdly, and finally, there were older people who might have received a handed down, but to them updated, product from other family members. It was particularly common for mobile phones to be passed on in this way, especially to older women in a family who often claimed not to care about how up to date their mobile was.

However, despite some reuse of mobile phones, due to the frequency of upgrades offered to most participants under their contracts, there were still many reports of people keeping numerous mobile phones at home.

*M:*  *I do hang on to most of my old phones. I have probably about seven.*

Group 1, Living with parents, London

This suggests that before consumers can be expected to think about keeping their mobile phones in use for longer, including by giving them a second life, the length and operation of mobile phone contracts may require careful consideration.
5.7 Conclusion and implications: up-to-date products

Given the acute sensitivity of most participants to being seen to be up-to-date, at least in some respects (be it in terms of technology, clothing or interior design), ambitions for extending the lifetimes of up-to-date products need to be realistically modest – at least in the short term. While some up-to-date products do break down before participants wanted them to, improving physical durability is not the main issue for these types of product. The principal challenge is consumers' expectations about how long they want to keep products for, where the ‘want’ is driven by a perception of the ‘value’ achieved from having the latest and most up-to-date products.

There are no suggestions in what follows aimed at transforming consumer behaviour and attitudes from a standing start, but rather of nudging them to achieve a slight stretching out of product lifetimes. This may perhaps pave the way for the possibility of a deeper and wider change in future consumer behaviour and therefore for increases in the durability of up-to-date products.

On that basis the following participants’ attitudes and behaviours appear to provide opportunities for intervention:

- interest in estimating product lifetimes at the point of purchase in order to increase the accuracy of lifetime value for money perceptions;
- the clear role that estimates of product lifetimes play in making sure that consumers are buying a good value product that will be reliable enough to last as long they want it to last;
- high expectations of reliability, particularly for electronic products over the short term of their expected lifetimes, and some frustration when they break before consumers want to update them;
- general levels of care taken over products to make sure that they last as long as they are required to last until they are updated;
- dissatisfaction with the operation and of warranties on electronic products, particularly around the inconvenience of having to do without while a product is sent for repair;
- guilt around the disposal of ‘perfectly good’ products unless they could be given to ‘a good home’;
- the use of informal reuse networks of family and friends to find unwanted products a good home;
- pressure around the need the keep up appearances leading to partial updating strategies to limit consumption to only conspicuous items (either on the person or in the home).
However, the findings also reveal a number of significant barriers to extending the lifetime of up-to-date products, perhaps even by only a small amount:

- the fundamental relationship between identity, status and belonging on the one hand and consumption on the other;
- consumer powerlessness in the face of the ‘need’ to consume;
- consumer enjoyment of consumption and specifically of the process of updating;
- the relatively low price and high volume of up-to-date products that are affordable by most consumers;
- consumption patterns led by business models that are based on short-term, regular product upgrades;
- consumer hoarding of unwanted products until they become increasingly out of date and consequently less suitable for resale or donation;
- low awareness of and consumer uncertainty over reuse channels and what might be accepted by them;
- the unacceptability of some products in the second hand market (eg non-fire retardant furniture; CRT televisions and potentially other electrical and electronic items);

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. The implications of these opportunities and barriers for interventions are set out in the bullet-point list below. Many of the suggestions that follow imply the need to move towards the provision of product service systems for at least some up-to-date products. The feasibility of such a move in general, as well as the more specific suggestions set out below, would need to be tested through dialogue with manufacturers and/or retailers.

- working with manufacturers to develop the potential for updatable and upgradable products that do not have to be replaced in their entirety in order to be up-to-date. Some items of furniture, as well as some electronic products may be amenable to such an approach.\(^{32}\) However, developments in this direction would have to represent good value to the consumer, and specifically better value than a new replacement product.
- working with retailers and manufacturers to develop ‘anchor’ or ‘classic’ products of home furnishing and clothing that could be marketed as durable lynchpins around which other less expensive, less durable products could be updated;
- building on existing consumer interest in the care of up-to-date electronic products around battery care and the use of protective cases for portable products;

\(^{32}\) The parallel study being run by ERM is looking specifically at sofas, carpets and mobile phones.
• working with the providers of warranties (both manufacturers and third parties) to improve their reputation and their ability to be used to prolong product lifetimes including the exploration of the potential of ‘courtesy’ products and on-site repairs for those items that consumers feel they cannot be without;

• working with manufacturers and service providers (particularly of electronic products, and specifically of mobile phone services) to improve the level of service offered to consumers after purchase based on rewards for keeping products rather than based on providing incentives to upgrade. Where manufacturers and retailers are already providing such services, their availability needs to be better communicated to consumers;

• providing clear information to consumers on locally available reuse channels including information about the acceptability or otherwise of different types of product into different channels.

• exploring the potential to encourage regular and resource efficient ‘purging’ of hoarded items (for example, WRAP’s successful trials of schools as collection points for discarded small WEE);

• continuing support for the development of second hand markets.

In addition to suggestions for potential interventions, our findings also suggest that there may be scope for developing the evidence base in respect of the relationship (if any) between purchase and disposal. Potential research questions include:

• What is the average expected lifetimes of the second lives of up-to-date products and therefore the resource benefits for different products of encouraging continuing use?

• What tends to happen to products at the end of their second lives?

• Are consumer purchase behaviours related to disposal behaviours in any way? Specifically:
  o What, if any, are the resource efficiency implications of hoarding? This question includes a consideration of both the waste and purchase consequences of hoarding. As the evidence currently stands, hoarding appears to have negative consequences from a waste perspective, but if hoarders purchase at a slower rate than non-hoarders, hoarding may bring overall resource efficiency benefits. Findings from this line of questioning could then be used to develop interventions to improve resource efficient consumer behaviours.
  o Do consumers with waste-averse attitudes and behaviours (perhaps defined using Defra’s segmentation model) purchase products at a different rate to others?
6 Workhorse products

This section explores those distinctive, although not discrete set of attitudes and behaviours that informed participants’ understandings, expectations and treatment of ‘workhorse products’.

The research findings and analysis for workhorse products are set out in respect of:

- A definition of workhorse products and examples of products falling within the workhorse category;
- Understanding of expected product lifetimes;
- Participants’ expectations of product lifetimes at purchase;
- Participants’ attitudes towards the actual, functional lifetime of products;
- Participants’ treatment of products including care and repair behaviours;
- Participants’ disposal behaviours in particular in respect of those behaviours giving a second life to products;
- Conclusions and implications of the findings for policy and interventions.

6.1 Defining workhorse products

Workhorse products are those products which participants in the discussion groups purchased primarily on the basis of their function. Participants expected workhorse products to do a job for them, and to get on with that job reliably. As a result, such products tended to be discarded only when they broke, rather than when their look needed updating.

Overall, the look of workhorse products was unimportant, or at least of only secondary importance, for most of the participants in our discussion groups.

If there was a washing machine that did exactly the same but it wasn’t quite as pretty, and it’s like in my kitchen, it’s under the sink and no one’s really going to see it - if it was a hundred quid cheaper but it wasn’t as rounded on the corner, I’d get the squarer one.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

Workhorse products for most participants included:

- major appliances;
- small appliances;
- less visible electronic and furnishing items kept in ‘non-public’ rooms of the house.

However, in the eyes of some participants, particularly women with higher incomes, some of their workhorse products also needed to be up-to-date (this was most true of small kitchen appliances, such as kettles and toasters, and was also occasionally the case for major appliances). We should stress that this was a noticeably different opinion expressed by only some participants and it was not reflective of the prevailing attitude towards workhorse products. Overall, we found that the impetus to replace workhorse products for aesthetic
reasons was not as widespread as the impetus to replace them for reasons of functional reliability.

6.2 Expected lifetimes of workhorse products

We asked participants how long they normally expected to use 30 specified products for before they gave them away, threw them away or sold them on.\(^{33}\) This section considers their responses to that question in respect of the 16 workhorse products asked about, firstly at a general level and then at a level of slightly more detail in terms of age, income and gender.

6.2.1. Average\(^{34}\) expected lifetimes

The table below sets out how long, on average, participants expected to use workhorse products for before they were replaced.\(^{35}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Under 2 years</th>
<th>2-5 years</th>
<th>5-7 years</th>
<th>7-10 years</th>
<th>10-25 years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electric toothbrush</td>
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<td>Kettle</td>
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<td>Washing machine</td>
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<td>Bed</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kitchen units</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toaster</td>
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<td>Microwave</td>
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<td>Sofa</td>
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<td>Wardrobe</td>
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<td>Vacuum cleaner</td>
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<td>Fridge</td>
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<td>Boiler</td>
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<td>Power tools</td>
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<td>Carpet</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Compared with Table 5 above, which set out expectations for up-to-date products, it is immediately apparent that participants expected most workhorse products to last longer than most up-to-date products.

\(^{33}\) 15 products for one half of participating consumers, 15 for the other half

\(^{34}\) ‘Average’ in this and the following section of the report is a calculated average of expected product lifetimes based on the recorded views of the 115 participants within the qualitative groups. Group participants were not a fully representative sample of the UK population so the ‘average’ in the groups should not be interpreted as a statistically reliable average that applies to the population as a whole. It should be interpreted as a general indication of how long participants expected products to last and of relative expectations of lifetimes between different products.

\(^{35}\) This exercise was not quantitative and the results cannot be generalised. They were part of the qualitative discussion group method and should be understood in that context.
6.2.2. The detail behind the averages

It was also the case that there were big differences in the maximum and minimum expectations for more workhorse products than there were for up-to-date products, as Figure 2 below illustrates. It should be noted that these differences are indicative and not generalisable due to the qualitative nature of the research.

These wide-ranging differences are likely to be attributable to a wide difference in both the ‘nature’ of the products in question and the ‘nurture’ given to them. The differences in the types of product bought (nature) and the way in which they were treated by participants (nurture) are explored in the remaining sections of this report.

Furthermore, we identified some differences between different groups of participants in terms of how long those groups expected products to last. Some potential indications of differences by either age or socio economic group emerged from the group discussions. These should be treated only as indicative, as the purpose of qualitative research such as this is not to quantify the incidence of behaviours within population groups; that is something which would need to be tested further using quantitative research.

Gender

36 The numbers shown in this diagram are for illustrative purposes only and are not statistically reliable.
On the whole, women participants saw themselves, and were seen by the men in their households, as being ‘in charge’ of major appliances and small home appliances. This is worth bearing in mind in terms of helping to understand the target audience for any potential communications aimed at increasing consumer understanding of product lifetimes (for more discussion on potential policy interventions see the conclusions and implications section 6.7 below).

**Age**

Older participants had the same higher expectations than their younger counterparts for workhorse as they did for up-to-date products: on average, they expected them to last slightly longer. These higher expectations by older people were also connected to an ethic of care that was noticeably different to younger people’s: older participants appeared to be more willing to try and repair workhorse products (for more on care and repair behaviours, see section 6.5 below).

**Income**

Lower income participants expected workhorse products to last slightly longer than those on higher incomes, and this was particularly marked for the most expensive of the workhorse products, specifically boilers and kitchen units. These very expensive products were seen as ‘investments’ by lower income participants, an issue which is explored in more detail in section 7 below. However, even major appliances costing a ‘couple of hundred’ pounds were also expected to last by lower income participants.

_F: I think when you buy anything you hope – don’t you? – that it will last. And most of what we buy, just lately, like the bigger goods, are a couple of hundred pound...You know, for that couple of hundred quid you want it to last. You don’t want to be forking out the next year another three hundred quid, and going through all that again._

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

6.3 **Purchasing workhorse products**

Having described how long participants expected to use workhorse products for, this section looks at how those expectations informed the judgments that participants made when they purchased workhorse products. It looks at the extent to which participants felt their expectations had either been met or disappointed.

6.3.1 **The relative importance of workhorse product’s lifetimes in participants’ purchasing decisions**

This section looks specifically at the findings from the stimulus exercise on purchase motivations and the group discussions surrounding it with respect to those groups that considered major appliances, small appliances and furniture (i.e. those products most often viewed as workhorse products).

As section 5.3 above set out in respect of up-to-date products, participants tended to ‘bundle’ purchase motivations into groups of roughly similar importance. For workhorse products overall, the bundle of motivations considered most important included the following:
• reliability
• quality
• value for money
• price
• how long a product lasts
• functionality.

These findings highlight two important concerns about workhorse products. Firstly, participants were clearly interested in the ‘nature’ of workhorse products. This is evident in their concern over ‘how long a product lasts’, its ‘reliability’, its ‘quality’ and its ‘functionality’. Secondly, participants were also clearly motivated by price.

Taken together, these two concerns seem to be treated as opposing considerations at the time of purchase, with ‘nature’ on the one side and ‘price’ on the other. The participant then weighed up each concern in the light of the other to try and achieve ‘value for money’. Put very crudely, there was some kind of ‘price over expected lifetime’ calculation going in participants’ minds at the time of purchase. If they got the calculation right, then they would have achieved good value.

This point is important to note because it indicates that there may be consumer demand for better information on expected product lifetimes so that consumers are able to judge more accurately what they are getting for their money.

In order to help them make such judgements, some of our participants carried out pre-purchase research into workhorse products, notably by using online review sites or relying upon word-of-mouth recommendations (this is considered in further detail in the section on ‘investment products’ at 7.3.1 below). However, research behaviours were not widespread amongst participants or across product categories, and for the most part they appeared to be restricted to ‘investment’ purchases. In the absence of research, the only way participants were able to make such judgments was by using proxies to guess the expected lifetimes of workhorse products. These proxies are considered in the section that follows.

However, before discussing proxies for product lifetime, it is necessary to sound a note of caution over participants’ interest in product lifetimes – or at least the outcome of that interest. Although we did not test with participants directly their response to better information about products’ functional lifetimes, there is reason to believe that even if longer life products were demonstrably better value (for example, through some sort of lifetime labelling), not all consumers would always opt for the better value, longer-lasting product.

There may be a whole range of other factors at play in any given purchase decision which might dissuade a consumer from making what might seem on paper to be the most rational, best value option. The group discussions revealed a number of issues such as, short-term planning horizons,37 uncertain life situations, restricted cash flow and brand loyalty, that could all contribute to the informed consumer choosing a shorter-life but perhaps cheaper product.

That said our findings showed that for many participants purchasing most workhorse products, product lifetime was an important part of their purchase consideration. The following section sets out the main means that participants told us they had for judging workhorse product lifetimes.

6.3.2. The proxies used by participants to judge a product’s lifetime

At a very general level, participants used several key factors to judge those things that were important to them when they came to purchase a workhorse product. Factors such as price, function, brand and quality were used by participants as proxies to judge more intangible properties such as reliability and ‘how long a products lasts’.

However, as the following analysis reveals, none of the proxies used by participants were necessarily accurate and were certainly not reliably accurate. This ties in with Tim Cooper’s findings on the unsatisfactory nature of the proxies for durability that are available to consumers (2005b).

**Price and function**

Some participants stated that they expected to get what they paid for, which meant that as a general rule of thumb, it tended to be applied regardless of the product in question, with more expensive workhorse products being seen as longer lasting than cheaper ones.

But price was not seen as a fool-proof indicator of how long a product might last by all participants for at least two reasons: we were told that some expensive products broke sooner than their price tag might indicate; and some cheaper products lasted longer than expected.

In more detail, the first reason concerns the risk of paying too much for a product in the absence of any real means of knowing how long that product might last. In some participant’s experience, more expensive products had broken as quickly as cheaper ones, making paying for them a gamble that was not worth taking.

\[ F: \text{That [how long a product will last] is how long is a piece of string really when you are buying something new.} \]

\[ F: \text{You can even buy a more expensive thing and it can break down.} \]

\[ F: \text{It is just sometimes luck, isn’t it?} \]

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

Participants often described how they made a calculation about whether the price paid represented good value for money based on how long they expected a product to last. The quote below is particularly interesting in this respect as it represents the fundamental difficulty that participants have when faced with the choice of cheaper and more expensive versions of the same product (in this case a washing machine).

\[ F: \text{Washing machine broke last summer, we replaced it. We have had five years out of it and we paid £200. Sorry, but you know, well it was, that was reasonable. Had I paid £700 for that washing machine and it had broke down in five years I would have been well miffed.} \]

Group 9, Empty Nester, Higher income, Manchester
At the heart of this participant’s observation is uncertainty over whether a more expensive washing machine would last proportionately longer than a cheaper product. In the quote above, the participant felt that 5 years was a reasonable lifetime for a £200 washing machine. Had he paid £700, he would have needed to get at least 17 years out of the machine to make it better value than the £200 alternative. Looked at like this it appears to be far more of a gamble for a consumer to choose the £700 machine than the £200 machine, because a 17-year lifetime, in the absence of any guarantee or even guidance/information, may be an unlikely outcome.

The second main reason that price was seen as an unreliable proxy was because some participants had had experiences of inexpensive electrical workhorse products that had surprised them by lasting longer than they had expected. Trying to find a rationale for a cheaper product being long lasting, some participants put forward an argument about ‘simplicity of function’.

To this end, there was a fairly common perception that cheaper electrical products are simpler in design than more expensive ones; and simpler electrical products have less that could go wrong with them (fewer functions meaning fewer component parts). As a result, these apparently simple, cheap products might be expected to last longer.

M:  *The cheaper it is, you know, the more simplicity that is there, you are probably going to get it to last longer. I know it sounds really silly but if you buy a £9.99 kettle it will probably last three times longer than one that is forty quid or fifty pounds because there is less than can go wrong.*

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

This kind of rationale around price and simplicity of function applied across the range of workhorse products with electrical components, including both small appliances and larger major appliances.

The price-simplicity argument, however, was not applied by participants to workhorse items of (non-electrical) furniture. In the case of workhorse furniture, participants tended to make a more straightforward use of price as a proxy, along with using other proxies such as brand and quality, each of which are discussed in turn below.

**Brand**

Some participants expressed an overall feeling that certain branded goods were more likely to last longer than others. Women participants in particular had strong opinions on which brands of appliance, and also sometimes of furniture, they would seek out. Conversely, however, participants talked less about brands that they would avoid on the basis of their poor reputation.

F:  *I want the best of the Bosch, you know?*

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

Brand reputation was also seen as proxy for a number of other intangible attributes that might shape expectations of products’ lifetimes, including reliability and quality.
For the brand, I think a few things tie into it. Like you associate quality with the brand, that it’s reliable, what it looks like. I think a lot of things tie into the brand.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

On the whole, the reputation of brands appeared to help participants to understand better what they were getting from any given product, often including an overall indication of its expected lifetime.

You see to think if I buy a Sony or something like that, it’s going to last a lot longer than if I buy a cheaper own make or whatever, so you tend to think of that along with the brand, I would. Just thinking, ‘if I’m buying a Sony television, that should last me a while’. Whereas if I was going to buy - I don’t know - another make - Tesco’s own. Yeah, something like that. You think, ‘well how long am I going to get out of it?’

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

Trusted brands mentioned to us by participants covered the full range of workhorse products including major appliances, small appliances, furniture and electronics. German manufacturers of major appliances and small appliances were thought of particularly favourably.

This trust was often based on previous good experiences of the products in question. What constituted a ‘good experience’ seemed to involve participants feeling that the products in question had been reliable up to a point that they considered to be reasonable – in other words, that the product had met with their expectations. This meant that even if participants had experiences of workhorse products which had broken, if they felt that those products had served them well – in other words had met their expectations and provided them with good value for money – then they were prepared to buy the same brand again.

I mean I would go back to some products that I bought before. Washing machine, for example. For example Hotpoint, we had a Hotpoint for years and it went on for ages and ages. The next two replacements were a Hotpoint.

Group 9, Empty Nester, Higher income, Manchester

The discussion above raises the issue of a certain amount of circularity in the reasoning attached to brand loyalty. We do not have any information on the differences (if any) in the functional lifetimes of products by brand – nor do consumers. It is therefore very difficult to tell how many of the reported ‘good experiences’ of participants with certain brands were based on the functional performance of those brands. They may instead have been informed to some greater or lesser extent by an ‘impression’ of durability created by the brand image.

There was evidence that some participants at least were alive to this possibility and as a result, they either dismissed the significance of brand entirely, or they looked for harder ‘evidence’ than the brand label that the product could be expected to last.
In terms of ‘evidence’, the reputation of certain brands was enhanced in the eyes of some participants by the warranties that came with their products. The length of warranties on offer was used by some as a guide to how much faith manufacturers had in their own products.

M: Certain brands will say, right, we’ll give you a ten year or five years straight off. And you think, well if they’re guaranteeing it for five years, it’s got to be good, because they don’t want to spend all their time fixing them.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

Some of the male participants in particular were sceptical about using brand as a guide to product lifetimes – at least at a superficial level - to guide their expectations. This resulted from a belief that for major appliances in particular, different brands were actually the same basic products made in the same factories but badged and styled differently to create brand differentiation.

M: Just our view on that was the fact that most of the brands now, washing machines, they are basically all made in Italy by the same people - coming out as three or four different brands. That is all we were thinking because we are men and thought in a different way.

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

However, this was not the prevailing impression of brand reputation that was given to us by most participants and it was not mentioned at all by any of the female participants who, as explained above, tended to be ‘in charge’ of appliance purchases.

Quality

The perceived quality of a product was seen as virtually synonymous with the length of time it could be expected to last.

F: Quality ties in doesn’t it? If you are getting a good quality product, it’s probably going to last longer, or you would make that assumption.

Group 9, Empty Nester, Higher income, Manchester

Although this was often tied in with brand and/or with price, as discussed above, it was also something tangible that participants felt they could assess by looking at and touching products to judge how well they had been put together and what they had been made out of.

M: Regardless of what it is, if it feels quite light, there is not much weight in it and it is plasticky.

Group 6, Family, Lower income, Newcastle

This tactile judgment of how durable a product was could be applied relatively easily to furnishing, quite easily to small appliances (although the internal workings and specifically electronic parts were not able to be judged in this way) but with some difficulty to major
appliances. The issues of 'simplicity of function' and 'brand badging' described above underscore how hard it is for consumers to assess the real, functional quality of major appliances, by making a physical examination of a product.

6.4 Participants' attitudes to the actual lifetimes of workhorse products

The preceding sections considered participants' expectations of workhorse products' lifetimes. This section looks at participants' experience of those products' lifetimes, and specifically their responses when workhorse products broke down – how they felt and who they blamed.

6.4.1. Responses to workhorse products which broke down: acceptance and annoyance

Once participants had developed their expectations of workhorse products' lifetimes, based in large part on the factors discussed above, their reactions to product break down tended to reflect the extent to which their expectations had or had not been met. On this basis, reactions tended either towards acceptance or annoyance.

Acceptance

If participants felt that they had received a good innings from their workhorse products, they tended to react phlegmatically when they broke down. The idea of a 'good innings' was largely formulated by participants with reference to their lifetime expectation for any given product. This was particularly true of participants who talked about buying 'cheap' major appliances – they simply did not expect them to last and part of their strategy was to get a few years' use out of them and then replace them with a new product.

F: If you buy a washing machine now they say it is not worth [repairing]. You might as well buy a new one because they are quite cheap really.

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

Some participants also acknowledged that their own usage of products may have had an impact on the products' lifetimes, which made them more accepting when the product broke down.

For example, products which received a lot of use were expected to break down sooner. Participants noted that household size, the presence of pets and children in the house, and the age and occupation of the user all contributed to varying levels of wear and tear.
F: Depends. If we're all single people and you're just doing small little dinner during the day, or in the evening [it might last longer], but if you've got a family of four or five, you know you're hammering the cooker.

M: Hammering it.

F: Yeah. Do you know what I mean?

M: It's like the washer and the dryer. It's on 24/7 when you've got kids.

Some participants also noted that habits and lifestyles had changed over their lifetimes - such as washing clothes more often and using electronic products more frequently – which may have contributed to the (perhaps false) perception of worsening product durability.

M: Stuff does get used continually. Whereas I think sort of back in the olden days everything was turned off and you looked after it.

Others were aware that their products may have lasted longer in the hands of other people, but they were not prepared to change their behaviour for the sake of making something last longer, and simply accepted the consequences.

M: I'm not one of those people that insist people take their shoes off at the door. I hate people whenever you hear someone say can you take your shoes off? No. Me and my shoes thank you. And so when people come in, all weathers, they wipe their feet on the mat and then they walk in. And if it gets dirty, it gets dirty.

Annoyance

There were frequent examples of participants in the discussion groups expressing annoyance when their workhorse products broke down before they had expected them to. This annoyance was directed towards small appliances in particular, but also towards major appliances.

However, the two product categories of small appliances and major appliances appeared to be thought about slightly differently by participants. Major appliances were seen as being designed to last a certain length of time by manufacturers (the idea of ‘built-in obsolescence’) and this is considered in more detail in the section that follows. Many small appliances, however, were generally seen as being unreliable and of poor quality, but not necessarily through any specific lifetime calculation on the part of manufacturers, more as the result of pervasive low standards (in participants’ views).

F: Irons. I go through no end of irons and it does annoy me. ...I don't know. I've bought cheap ones, expensive ones but they still go after about twelve months.
Some participants reported so many bad experiences with certain products (usually small appliances) that they felt a total loss of agency when it came to making those products last longer. The product’s lifetime was something that simply happened to them – something that was beyond their control.

This sentiment links back to the discussion above on the inadequate nature of the proxies for durability that are currently available to consumers, creating the feeling that it was just a matter of ‘luck’ whether or not any given product turned out to be reliable and long lasting. The fact that it came down to luck was described by participants as particularly annoying. Participants also felt that this element of luck was somehow attached to them as much as to the product, with some describing themselves as being either ‘lucky’ or ‘unlucky’ with certain products.

Furniture, however, was rarely talked about by participants in terms of them being annoyed with breakages, with one general exception. Flat-pack furniture was sometimes mentioned as being unable to withstand house moves. Some participants were annoyed by this because they felt that despite the fact that the furniture had been flatpacked, it has still cost them enough money to be worth taking to their new home intact.

M: The flat-pack furniture is fine when you move in. You can’t move house with flat pack furniture.
M: That’s true.
M: You might as well throw it away and buy brand new flat-pack furniture when you move to your new house.
Q: Why is that?
M: Just because it doesn’t transport. You can’t move flat-pack furniture without it sort of becoming unstable and falling apart. And it doesn’t matter how much you spend on flat-pack furniture i.e. if you go top end, sort of IKEA or something like that and spend a lot of money, like four hundred quid for a wardrobe, it’s still not going to move.

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

6.4.2. Responses to products which broke down: blaming manufacturers for built-in obsolescence

Manufacturers of major appliances were widely accused by participants of making products with built-in obsolescence. Participants were generally of the view that major appliances (and in particular washing machines) had a design life of just a few years – with the exception of those participants who had found a trusted brand that they had come to rely upon (discussed above in section 6.3.2).

Many participants had reached their view on built-in obsolescence by comparing either their own past experiences of product lifetimes, or by comparing the past experiences of their parents with their own current experiences.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the strongest sentiments around change for the worse came from older participants. This is something which corresponds with Cooper’s E-SCOPE study findings which suggested that older groups were more likely to be dissatisfied with the life spans of their appliances than were other age groups (Cooper, 2004).
In particular, there was a widespread perception across the groups that many workhorse products from the major appliances and small appliance categories had been made with built-in obsolescence.

Participants were conscious that retailers and manufacturers wanted them to buy as many products as possible, and perceived decreasing product lifetimes as evidence of this. A general feeling that manufacturers deliberately build products with short lifespans in order to drive markets and profits was reflected in cynicism that products often seem to break shortly after the manufacturer’s guarantee expires.

F: It seems like as soon as that guarantee runs out...
F: They always seem to break.
F: The thing breaks down.
F: Doesn’t it?
F: Yes. Recently.
F: It is like clockwork.
F: Yes. That never used to happen years ago. So I think it is something they’ve done over the years that they have now made this appliance –
F: It has got a mini clock inside!
F: Yes. That once the year is over that is it, you know?

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

However, the idea of built-in obsolescence was not always seen by participants as a calculated design strategy by manufacturers, but sometimes as a consequence of mass production and cheaper foreign labour. The movement of manufacturing from the UK to abroad was mentioned repeatedly, though not exclusively, by some participants in the two oldest groups, who seemed to rue the loss of the British manufacturing base.

M: Life expectancy of products has definitely gone down. And purely because things are now a lot cheaper to buy, and the manufacturers basically - they ship all the manufacturing out to the cheapest bidder. And so products aren’t made to last as long, they’re not as reliable as they used to be.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

As a result of the general and widespread understanding amongst participants of the drive towards disposability, most workhorse products, with very few exceptions, were seen to be susceptible to the downward trend in durability. Although many participants reported this as negative trend, there were few spontaneous indications from participants that they were prepared to pay more for more durable items. However, it would be too much to conclude that this therefore means that consumers (or some consumers at least) would not be prepared to pay more if they had a guarantee or objective indication (e.g. through labelling) of the expected lifetime of the product in question – which currently they do not.

This links back to the phenomenon described above, whereby the lifetime uncertainty of a more expensive, ‘better’ brand when compared with a cheaper one meant that participants were not always convinced that an expensive product would last proportionately longer.
There were, however, a very small number of products that participants knew of where brand reputation rested on them not just being better in some slightly intangible sense, but upon their reputation for durability. These products are dealt with in the ‘investment products’ (section 6) below as we feel that the mindset when choosing to ‘invest’ is sufficiently different to merit separate treatment.

6.5 Taking care of workhorse products

Participants’ attitudes towards product care, and their resultant caring behaviours, varied greatly. This section considers a range of ‘caring’ behaviours including the use of servicing and warranties as well as product repair.

6.5.1. General caring behaviours

The kinds of general caring behaviours mentioned in this sub-section tended to come from lower income participants. There was noticeably less discussion of being careful with products in the higher income groups. However, it must be stressed that even in the lower income groups we did not get the sense that caring behaviours were particularly widespread, and they appeared to vary by person and product (see section 4 above for the discussion of this as an overarching theme).

Even though these behaviours were not widely discussed by participants they are useful to report, as there are perhaps useful lessons about simple, low-effort actions that could be encouraged more widely, and which also may have the potential to save consumers money.

Those caring behaviours mentioned during group discussions were most commonly talked about in relation to workhorse products, and in particular to small and large appliances and very specifically, to appliances that used water. This was due to reasonably widespread understanding by participants of the effects of limescale on appliances. Treating limescale was considered a cheap, easy and effective means of extending product lifetimes.

F: With the washing machine I like to use Calgon –
M: Yes. That is a good idea.
F: Because you see that commercial with all the limescale and so basically that is kind of like a little thing that is looking after it.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

Descaling was not done by everyone, however, and was cited by several people as a reason for getting rid of a product either because limescale had spoiled the look of an appliance (e.g. kettle) or it had caused the product to break down.

The other behaviour most commonly mentioned in respect of taking care of products was cleaning. Carpets and curtains were particularly mentioned in this respect. The effect of cleaning such products was not necessarily thought of in terms of keeping them in better working order, but in terms of preventing them from becoming ‘shabby’, and so maintaining their look for longer and in this way extending their lifetimes.

M: Once a year get someone coming in and do it. You are hoovering it but you are not really getting anything out.
You only get the top base. Get someone in there to clean it once a year.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

Again, words such as ‘minging’ or ‘horrible’ were used to describe reasons for getting rid of products such as carpets or rugs (and even an oven), perhaps reinforcing a case for supporting consumers with care advice or services.

Finally, the other main caring behaviour talked about in respect of workhorse products involved following manufacturers’ instructions. The quote below illustrates the point that the idea of something being ‘broken’ may range from the product requiring a simple ‘fix’ in terms of easily performed, DIY maintenance, to the product being entirely broken beyond even professional repair. Given, as set out below, that participants were often unwilling to even investigate the possibility of repair, it may be that very easily fixable products are being discarded due to lack of consumer knowledge. This in turn raises the possibility for interventions aimed at improving consumer’s ability to take basic care of products themselves. 38

M: In fact a personal thing which just happened within the last three weeks to me - My wife’s dryer wasn’t working and you know what I did? I got out the instructions and read them. Apparently at the bottom, it is a condensing unit which has to be cleaned out once a month. We’ve had it four years! It is clean now. But if I hadn’t read the instructions I would have gone and bought a new dryer. It is working perfectly now because I took that bit out and cleaned it out, put it back, smashing. But I read the instructions.

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

6.5.2. Regular servicing of workhorse products

Caring behaviour also included the regular servicing of gas and electrical appliances. Boilers were the item most frequently serviced by participants. However, some older participants talked about their past experiences of having their washing machines serviced regularly – something which none of them did any longer as a result of it being perceived as uneconomical, given the relatively low price of replacement products.

It was still fairly commonplace, however, for participants to have taken out service contracts with utility companies that covered appliances as well as boilers.

F: ..So I thought I need some sort of service contract that I can depend on. So I have paid for it and they come and do the boiler every year, central heating, check the electrics, everything. And for me I feel it’s worth the money, it’s peace of mind.

Group 9, Empty Nester, Higher income, Manchester

38 For an example of a resource aimed at consumers for just this reason, see http://www.ukwhitegoods.co.uk/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1449
6.5.3. Using warranties to care for workhorse products: attitudes and experience

Participants talked about taking out and using warranties, sometimes referred to as ‘extended guarantees’, to protect their workhorse products far more frequently than they talked about warranties in respect of up-to-date products. Warranties had been bought for major appliances and large items of furniture, and occasionally even for smaller appliances.

**Attitudes**

Participants’ attitudes to warranties appeared to show very clear differences towards risk as well as towards product care.

As with purchase decisions, the concept of a warranty being ‘worth it’ was closely tied up with the concept of getting good value for money. In some instances, the value offered by warranties appeared clear-cut to participants: inexpensive products with expensive warranties were generally ruled out as representing poor value. Here the better value option was seen as throwing the product away if it broke and simply buying a new one.

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**M:** You can go and buy, I mean like you were saying, you bought a George Foreman cooker grill, twenty quid or whatever, a big one, I can’t remember, a year guarantee on it and they try and sell you a product replacement cover which costs you sort of eight pound a year for three years and you think what is the point?

**F:** Exactly there is no point.

**M:** If it breaks you throw it away. It would cost more to get it repaired or to insure it against breakdown than it costs to just replace it.

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Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

If the product was more expensive, then the decision often appeared less clear cut, but participants would still attempt to assess the value of the warranty being offered to them by comparing the expected price and lifetime of the product they were buying against both the cost of the warranty and the cost of a replacement product.

Sometimes this calculation was made less straightforward by the way that the warranty was being sold, particularly if payments were spread over time. However, for some participants this made them more likely to purchase the warranty, not less, as small, regular payments tended to be less visible, and (on the basis of cash flow rather than total cost) more affordable. The following quote illustrates not only that point, but also the idea that for some, more risk-averse participants, they were happy for warranties to give them only peace of mind rather than any tangible benefits in terms of product lifetimes.

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**F:** Yes I took it [extended warranty] on my fridge and it was like two pounds ninety a month. I didn’t even realise it was going out of my account really. And I never needed to use it but it was always there if I did.

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Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton
Some participants rejected extended guarantees or warranties on the basis that statutory consumer protection, in the form of the Sale of Goods Act, provided them with better protection for their products than a warranty ever could.

*M:* Well the Sale of Goods Act is actually better than a guarantee anyway isn’t it? Because it has got to be of usable quality, for a reasonable period of time, and your guarantee is nothing.

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

The reputation of the Sale of Goods Act and how it compares with warranties is an interesting point that might be worth consideration in terms of developing any policies or interventions aimed at improving the operation of warranties as a means of helping to extend product lifetimes.

**Experience**

Participants reported very mixed experiences with warranties and this clearly would have fed back into the difference in attitudes towards warranties set out above. Some participants had had good experiences, which often meant that their products had been repaired free of charge, with clear benefits to both the participant and for the product’s lifetime.

*F:* Because I’ve been in my house three years, and I’ve had the washing machine fixed three times. But luckily I got the extended warranty, the extra five years. And I’ve used it like millions of times.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

A number of others, however, reported satisfaction with warranties because they had been offered a replacement product as opposed to a repair. These participants were usually those who considered their experience to have been particularly successful. This point raises question marks over the ability of warranties to deliver longer product lifetimes in the absence of both a change in consumer attitudes (developing a willingness to get products repaired) and of product design (improvements in the ability of products to be repaired).

Some participants rejected the idea of warranties in any case, either because of poor experiences in the past or generally negative perceptions about the way in which warranties operate.

Similar to the case with up-to-date products, a common criticism of warranties came from participants who felt that they had not been fully aware of the limitations of the warranties they had purchased and in the event of product breakdowns ‘small print’ excluded the damage that their product had sustained.

*F:* Where it comes to the small print and the thing that you want to be covered that has gone wrong is not on the policy.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry
These kinds of experiences or perceptions meant that some participants developed a position on warranties that meant they simply disregarded them out of hand as a useful, good value mechanism for extending the lifetime of their products.

F: It's a con.
F: Save your money.
M: Complete con.

Group 11, Empty Nester, Lower income, Bristol

By contrast, the performance of service contracts covering gas and major electrical appliances was raised spontaneously in group discussions as something that was well-liked and considered good value for money.

However, it is worth noting that there may have been a self-selecting bias in the reporting of the performance of such service contracts. Those who decided to take out service contracts may have been amongst the most risk averse, perhaps because of past bad experiences, perhaps because they had young children, or were elderly and lived alone, and therefore particularly valued the peace of mind offered by such blanket protection.

M: Also we've got this, I think it is with British Gas something, it covers the boiler, the cooker, the fridge, the freezer, everything in our house is covered. So if it ever breaks, it is a phone call. We pay monthly for it. That is like a bit of peace of mind.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

Overall, therefore, the picture was extremely mixed on both participants' willingness to use warranties to extend the lifetimes of workhorse products and on the ability of warranties actually to deliver longer product lifetimes. On this basis, there would appear to be scope for investigating how the role of warranties in extending product lifetimes could be improved. Specific aspects to examine would include: increasing the appeal of warranties to more consumers; addressing negative consumer perceptions about repair; and improving design for reparability.

6.5.4. Repairing workhorse products: professional repairs

In much the same way that participants performed a value-for-money calculation when deciding how much to pay for any given purchase, or whether or not to buy a warranty, they also made calculations as to whether a replacement would represent better value than a repair. This sub-section considers this calculation generally, before considering specific product differences within the workhorse category.

General attitudes to repair of workhorse products

Overall, the findings of the group discussions largely support the findings from other research which have emphasised a number of significant barriers to product repair (Cooper and Mayers, 2000; Huysentruyt and Read, 2008).

In most instances, participants reported that they opted for replacements over repair due to a combination of the low cost of replacements and the high cost of repair – although this was frequently a perceived rather than a confirmed cost. The quote below illustrates just
how significant the barrier of perceived cost was amongst some participants. The idea that repairs were poor value may have been accepted as such a universal ‘truth’ that participants did not even bother to investigate actual repair costs.

F: I would never get anything repaired.
Q: You wouldn’t? Why not?
F: Just purely because it is probably cheaper to go out and buy a new one.
Q: Would you bother trying to find out whether or not it is cheaper?
F: No, no. It is too much hassle.

Another part of the value calculation involved participants making judgments about how much life the product might have left in it after it had been repaired. Here we saw that most people were unwilling to countenance repair if they thought that their product had ‘had a good innings’ because if they had one thing fixed, before long, they reasoned, something else would probably go wrong with it anyway, in which case it was better to buy a new one.

M: You see if I bought a cooker for say seven hundred pounds and five years later it broke down on me then I wouldn’t spend one hundred and fifty pounds for a bloke to come out and fix it –
F: Just get a new one.
M: Because even though he fixes it, it is probably going to only last another year.

This line of reasoning was closely linked to the idea that a product may have reached the end of its ‘natural’ life. This point is particularly interesting because it illustrates that a product’s lifetime may have been linked to its reliability (how long can it go before it first breaks down) more closely than its durability (how long can it go before it is broken beyond repair) in some participants’ minds. This raises the issue of how the lifetimes of repairs are perceived by consumers more widely. Our findings suggest that for most workhorse products the lifetime perception of repairs, and hence their perceived value, is currently low.

We did occasionally have reports from participants of them keeping major appliances (usually washing machines) for a very long time, and repeatedly getting them repaired on the basis that the product in question had served them very well and could continue to serve them well once it had been repaired. This, however, was a minority opinion and was usually found amongst older participants who were of the impression that their product had been built to a better, more durable standard than its modern replacement (linked to the idea of built-in obsolescence and deteriorating product standards discussed in section 6.4.2 above).

Small appliances
Small appliances were very rarely seen as worth repairing, or even worth investigating repairing. In some instances small appliances were seen as so disposable that some participants did not even think it was worth their while getting them repaired while they were still under guarantee.
Q: What about things like kettles and irons and stuff?
F: Oh no.
M: No just chuck them away.
F: No I wouldn’t even bother.
F: I don’t even bother keeping the guarantees.
F: They are too cheap to buy.
M: They are regarded as disposables aren’t they basically yes, pretty much.

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

This may have been particularly true of appliances bought from supermarkets, with some participants reporting that they simply threw away their grocery receipts as a matter of course. If these receipts included proof of purchase of a small appliance, then that was just too bad.

This leads us to hypothesise that the purchase of appliances from supermarkets along with the groceries may be contributing to a downward levelling of norms around expectations for the lifetime of those products. Such a hypothesis would clearly require further investigation.

It may also be the case that attitudes of disposability were in fact realistic, as the failed attempts at repair by some older participants showed:

F: I took an iron to be repaired and the man just laughed at me, he said just buy a new one because it is cheaper.
M: I did that with a jug kettle. He just said, just bin it.

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

Perhaps as a logical conclusion of the reportedly uneconomic nature of having small appliances repaired, some participants commented on the loss of the ‘those little shops’ that would once have mended such products as a matter of course.

F: And plus there’s not the - the little odd-job man, you know - there used to be like those little shops, electrical shops, where you could go and take your radio and your hoover and this, that and the other.

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

**Major appliances**

These barriers to repair, however, were not limited to small appliances. Most participants reported that they believed that even the more expensive major appliances would be cheaper to replace than to repair. Participants commonly cited the expense of call out charges and labour costs on products such as washing machines, dishwashers and tumble dryers as a prohibitive barrier to even investigating the potential for such products to be professionally repaired.

Amongst those who had investigated the repair of major appliances, it was common for them to say that the quote they had been given was uneconomical. Many felt that the direct cause of this was the way that the products had been designed and manufactured. We were told that relatively minor and/or predictable faults required very expensive
treatment because the necessary parts could not be easily sourced. This point was closely linked to the idea of built-in obsolescence (discussed at section 6.4.2 above).

F: About six months ago my tumble dryer broke and it was only the fan belt but actually when they came they said you might as well because the whole machine on my thing had to come completely away to get the fan belt. They said it is not worth doing it with the bearings now. You might as well get a new one.

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

However, it was not always a straight comparison of the relative cost of repair over replacement, there was also the issue that repairs were seen as time consuming and inconvenient. This was particularly true of products that were heavily relied upon, such as washing machines.

F: Well, like the washing machine. If mine stops working, I will think, right, how long have I had it? Should I get somebody out? Because by the time I get them out, pay the callout charge, and then you get the parts, then you have got to wait. I sometimes think, right, I will buy a new one. In fact that is what I did.

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

That said, there were examples of participants who had experienced transformative repair experiences, their presumption of expense and inconvenience having been overturned by a successful and good value repair.

F: I paid for my hoover to be repaired when it broke. It’s a Dyson. I was absolutely gutted because I have had it years. And I just thought oh god it’s going to cost me another three hundred quid to get a new hoover. And just like a light bulb switched on, ‘oh I’ll just see how much it will cost to be repaired.’ Never had anything like that repaired before. Normally we say we’ll get a new one. And it cost me fifteen pounds. I was so chuffed. And now I really stop to think about just repairing things rather than buying new.

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

This quote illustrates the positive effects of just one good repair experience, with the participant reporting that she now stops to consider repair as a general rule. Given the apparently significant perception barrier to more consumers having more products repaired, encouraging consumers to take that successful first repair step will be a key challenge for any interventions in this area.

Furniture

For others still, it was not necessarily the assumed expense of repair that put them off, but a feeling that they did not know where to look to find someone who might do the work needed, perhaps concluding that such services did not even exist. This was more the case when it came to having workhorse furniture repaired than it was for major appliances.
6.5.5. Repairing workhorse products: DIY repairs

Most participants said that they did not feel qualified or skilled enough to repair many things themselves, and sometimes reported past bad experiences to substantiate their claims.

However, others did not feel that their own skills were to blame so much as inherent difficulties with accessing and understanding contemporary products. This links back to the arguments made in the section above relating to the complexity of design, and particularly the use of electronic components. It also relates to manufacturing techniques such as ‘moulded units’ or ‘sealed units’ that seemed to render items unrepairable even in the hands of older participants experienced in DIY repair.

Experience and knowledge of repairs (either the participants’ own, that of friends and/or family, or that offered online) appeared to be particularly important contributors to participants’ willingness to attempt the repair of workhorse products. Overall, however, there was a large variation in participants’ attitudes towards DIY repair by both person and product.

Older participants were more often prepared to have a go at fixing things, although even amongst this age group there was still a great deal of variation to person, both in terms of general willingness to try and mend things and in terms of which products people were willing to even attempt to fix.

Fewer younger participants were as willing to try DIY fixes. Those who were sometimes reported using internet repair forums, official product sites and video streaming of repair
processes (e.g. YouTube videos showing you how to repair a product), to help them carry out the repair.

\[ F: \text{Although our cooker, we’ve got like a grill element inside the cooker and that broke and rather than get it repaired my husband looked on the internet as to how to fix it and ordered this part and fixed it himself...he just did it himself by looking on the internet.} \]

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

It was more common for younger participants to feel tentative about DIY repairs: they may have carried out some very basic preliminary investigations to rule out the most obvious potential causes of the breakdown, but they were then unlikely to take the repair any further if the product remained broken.

However, younger participants were sometimes able call on family and friends who might have been more skilled and knowledgeable than they were, to help them out with repairs, pointing to the importance of networks in facilitating the repair of products.

6.6 Disposing of workhorse products

Most participants claimed that they discarded their workhorse products only when they had broken.\[39\] This in turn meant that nearly all participants told us that such products went straight into the waste stream.

Larger electrical items tended to be taken away by retailers delivering new replacements (under the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) regulations) or taken to the tip.\[40\]

\[ Q: \text{Okay. So, when these things [household appliances] break down, and you haven’t got them insured, and you have difficulty repairing them, what do you actually do with them once they’re broken?} \]

\[ F: \text{Down the tip.} \]

\[ M: \text{The tip.} \]

\[ M: \text{Well - take them to the tip.} \]

\[ F: \text{Yeah.} \]

\[ M: \text{No choice. Or pay the council to take it.} \]

Group 11, Empty Nester, Lower income, Bristol

Smaller items, on the other hand, would generally be put in with the household waste.

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*\[39\] Although some participants did update workhorse products that were not broken, but as described above, this was not the main reason for disposing of workhorse products for most participants.

*\[40\] The word “tip” was used almost universally by participants to indicate the local authority household waste and recycling centre (HWRC).*
Q: So let us just be really, really honest what kinds of things have gone in the bin over the last few years like appliances? Your kettles? Do they go in the bin?
F: They have done.
M: Only if they are broken.

Group 10, Empty Nester, Lower income, Brighton

These findings are supported by previous research. Curran and Williams’ (2007) research on household bulky waste found the majority of items were taken to Household Waste Recycling Centres, while Darby and Obara have documented the fact that small WEEE tends to end up in general refuse (Darby and Obara, 2004).

Larger items of furniture, however, were treated somewhat differently, with participants in our groups reporting that they attempted to give them a second life. Such large items of furniture may have once represented an ‘investment’ purchase for the original owner and as such their disposal is dealt with in more detail in the ‘investment products’ (section 6) below.

6.7 Conclusion and implications: workhorse products

The above findings show that there may be real potential to work with consumers to extend the lifetimes of workhorse products. In particular, the following participants’ attitudes and behaviours may provide opportunities for intervention:

- attempts to understand product lifetimes at the point of purchase and in pre-purchase planning to achieve value;
- uncertainty over the expected functional lifetime of products due to the inadequate nature of the proxies currently available to consumers for judging product lifetimes;
- caring for products in use (especially amongst lower income consumers) specifically with the aim of lengthening product lifetimes;
- dissatisfaction with the operation and value of warranties;
- dissatisfaction with the service and value of repairs;
- repair networks, both of family and friends and online.

The findings also reveal a number of significant barriers to extending the lifetime of workhorse products:

- the low price of replacement products;
- potential limits to consumer interest in or appetite for durability;

41 Disposal behaviours are explored in more detail in the second stage of the research - Brook Lyndhurst (2011), Public Understanding of Product Lifetimes and Durability: Reuse of Bulky Items, for Defra.
the strength of perceived barriers to repair to the extent that many consumers will not even investigate repair;

real barriers to repair including product design, levels of service, inconvenience and cost.

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:

better product lifetime information for consumers thinking about purchasing workhorse products, with an emphasis on bringing value to the consumer. This could be done in a number of ways, but how to manage consumer expectations of what ‘average’ information might mean in practice (i.e. how the ‘nature’ of the product would respond to the ‘nurture’ consumers gave it) would need to be very carefully considered. For example, should lifetime information on washing machines be given as number of years or number of washes? How could this work for an iron or a sofa?

working with manufacturers to encourage product design more amenable to repair;

working with the providers of warranties (both manufacturers and third parties) to improve both the reputation and service performance of warranties and to enable them to promote product repair in preference to product replacement;

working with manufacturers to improve the level of service offered to consumers after purchase. This could include innovative service contracts between manufacturers and consumers that are available to consumers at the point of purchase;

exploring how repair networks could be supported and encouraged, including online information resources for consumers;

providing clear information to consumers on key points of product care, based on manufacturers’ knowledge of product performance.

All of the above potential interventions would have to bring real and obvious value to the consumer if consumers are to respond to them. On the basis of our findings and that of other research in this area, there does not appear to be any other convincing motivation for consumers to decide to extend the lifetime of their workhorse products.
7 Investment Products

For at least some products, some of the time, participants told us that they felt as though they were making ‘an investment’. Understanding the investment mindset allows us to consider the motivations, attitudes and behaviours that appeared to be linked clearly and unambiguously to longer product lifetimes. It is a mindset which permeated every aspect of the consumer product lifecycle: at purchase, during use and at disposal.

This section considers that investment mindset by looking at the following:

- the definition of investment products;
- expected lifetimes of investment products;
- purchase behaviours and attitudes in relation to making an investment;
- behaviours and attitudes around caring for and disposing of investment products;
- conclusions and implications for policies and intervention.

7.1 Defining investment products

What participants meant by an ‘investment’ involved more than simply money or the cost of an item, though that was usually part of the equation. Investment products were those that were in some way special, perhaps because they were things participants had waited a long time for, were a stretch financially, provided an extra bit of value in terms of status or identity, were especially aesthetically pleasing, and/or had emotional value. Because they were special, they were expected to last.

In making an investment, participants were particularly keen to ensure that they bought the ‘right’ product. This led to considered purchases and careful ownership – something we have identified as an ‘investment mindset’. Although, as always, participants brought a bundle of considerations to choosing their investment products, one of the key distinguishing features of an investment product was that participants expected it to last.

Investment products could come from any product category, depending upon which products any given participant, for reasons of their own, might choose to invest in. We heard about examples of investment in every discussion group, spanning every product category. Investment products therefore cut across both the workhorse and the up-to-date product-types discussed above.

M: I’ve got a pair of Timberland boots which I’ve had since I was eighteen actually, and again I resoled them and they are virtually indestructible. They look really battered but they still work. They are fine.

F: I do that as well. If it is an expensive pair. If I have spent money on it then I will resole and keep it.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

The cross-cutting nature of investment products means that they might have been discarded because they were broken, particularly because they were broken beyond repair. They may also have been discarded because they were updated. In both cases the distinguishing
feature between them and non-investment products from either the workhorse or the up-to-date product categories would be the length of time they were kept in use for before they were finally discarded. Investment products were kept for longer than any other kind of product, regardless of the eventual reason for their disposal.

The investment mindset was generally applied only to ‘premium’ products within any given category and/or relatively expensive products (relative to income and to other alternative products). Therefore a product that might be considered ‘cheap’ and therefore reasonably disposable to some, might well have been an investment for others. This in turn meant that more expensive items tended to be treated with an investment mindset by more participants, and in particular by more lower income participants. For example, major appliances, large items of furniture and expensive electronics (particularly televisions) were the kind of purchases that many participants (although by no means all) considered an investment.

M: Where if you are buying a lamp, you are mainly buying it because it looks nice with your other furniture but you are only going to spend fifty pounds at most. Whereas a sofa is a big investment.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

Participants also appeared to treat investment idiosyncratically, so that, for example, one participant might ‘invest’ only in shoes, another only in electronic gadgets, another still only in home furnishings, and so on, depending upon their personal preference.

Very few participants held a broadly constant investment mindset across all product types. Those who did appeared to be a noticeably different minority within groups and they have been commented on above in section 5.3.2 under the heading of ‘dislike of our throwaway society’.

This also raises a related point, which is that very few participants appeared to be motivated to keep products for longer for reasons of environmental concern. In other words, they did not make the link between keeping products for longer, reducing product churn and therefore improving resource efficiency. On this basis, it would be wrong to see the investment mindset as a conscientiously pro-environmental mindset for most participants.

Differences by participant and by product are very apparent in the findings set out in the following section on participants’ expectations of product lifetimes.

### 7.2 Expected lifetimes of investment products

As in sections 4 and 6, this section draws from the stimulus exercise in which we asked participants how long they normally expected to use 30 specified products for before they gave them away, threw them away or sold them on. It should be noted that these findings are indicative and not generalisable due to the qualitative nature of the research.

The figure below sets out participants’ expectations for the lifetime all of the 30 products we asked about, regardless of whether we then classified them as up-to-date, workhorse or

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42 15 products for one half of participating consumers, 15 for the other half
investment. The top end of the ‘whisker’ on each bar illustrates the maximum expectation for each product shown. These maximums may give some indication of the potential length of lifetimes that can be achieved when participants decide to ‘invest’ in a product. Clearly, if more consumers shared the maximum expectations shown, this would reduce product churn considerably and so have significant benefits for resource efficiency.

Figure 3 – How long would you normally expect to use this product for? (Samples of 55 and 58)\(^43\)

It is important to note the following points about the information in the figure:

- Participants were asked to say how long they would normally expect to use products for. This may imply that some investment products had expected lifetimes that exceeded those shown in the figure because they were not normal purchases but exceptional ones. For example, the above table shows an expected maximum lifetime for coats to be 10 years, but in group discussions one participant claimed to have owned a ‘designer’ coat – clearly an investment product - for nearly 20 years.

  \(F:\) I’ve got a coat that I have had for nearly twenty years. But it is a going out coat and it is more a designer coat.

  Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

- The maximum lifetimes shown were often the result of one or two participants’ answers, illustrating the wide range of experience and attitudes between individuals.

\(^{43}\) The numbers shown in this diagram are for illustrative purposes only and are not statistically reliable.
Some products reflected more consensus on expected lifetimes than others. In particular, kitchen units, boilers and carpets had the greatest number of participants agreeing on the maximums shown.

The lengthy product lifetimes indicated by the maximum figures cannot all be attributed to participants’ treatment of products or ‘nurture’. The element of ‘nature’, which includes the products’ inherent durability, also has an important role to play in the longer lifetimes of investment products. How participants judged which those inherently durable products might be when they come to make an investment purchase is considered in the section which follows.

7.3 Purchasing investment products

During group discussions, participants revealed a range of behaviours that they employed when they were purchasing investment products. This is not to suggest that these behaviours were not demonstrated when other purchases were made, but it was the case that as part of the ‘investment mindset’ of care and consideration, these behaviours played an important role. Participants invested time, effort and money in such purchases to make as sure as they could that they were buying something not only that they wanted, but also that would last for longer than the alternatives that were available to them.

The behaviours that we heard about in group discussions included researching product reputation, buying from trusted retailers, buying products that either came with extended warranties as standard, or buying extended warranties separately. Each of these behaviours will be considered in turn below.

7.3.1. Researching product reputation

Although ‘recommendations’ were not in the top bundle of participants’ purchase motivations in the stimulus exercise, group discussions revealed that for some product purchases – and for some participants more than others – recommendations and other related information searches were thought to be particularly useful for identifying products worth investing in.

Online reviews

Online review sites were commonly mentioned in group discussions amongst all but the oldest participants. These sites were used particularly in respect of electronic items and appliances (most commonly major appliances, but occasionally small appliances as well).

Amongst those participants who reported using online review sites, some said that they used them regularly, regardless of the value of the item in question, while others claimed to only use them for more expensive products. Male participants often claimed to be particularly interested in using review sites, although some women also reported using them.
Word-of-mouth recommendations

Others, however, preferred to go on the recommendation of people they knew and trusted. In general, women participants stressed the importance of word-of-mouth recommendations.

7.3.2. Buying from a high street retailer

Even though many participants might have researched online, some stressed the importance of buying from a high street retailer (or at least visiting one) rather than conducting the entire purchasing process online, if they wanted to be sure that their product would last.

This was in part to do with some participants wanting to be able to touch and feel products to assess their quality in the flesh.

Some participants in several of the groups only, also felt that high street retailers offered more protection than internet retailers if something went wrong, and on that basis they were prepared to make the effort to go shopping and perhaps even pay a higher price than that offered online. This was particularly true of electrical and electronic products.

7.3.3. The importance of brand

Brand appeared to be a very important means by which participants judged those products worth investing in.

Although brand did not appear in the top bundle of purchase motivations for most of the group sort exercises, group discussions around investment products revealed that brand was of key importance for such purchases.

The point made in section 6.3.2 about participants using brand as a proxy for product lifetimes is particularly pertinent in respect of investment purchases.

This raises the key issue of using brand reputation as a platform for promoting longer product lifetimes. The promise of a longer lifetime without the backing of a desirable and trusted brand, may not have widespread appeal to participants, particularly if they are spending a lot of money on an investment purchase.
M: The ones that have got the big guarantees - take Kia - you know - they've got this whole seven year warranty. Which is unheard of in the car industry. But, you know - it wouldn't make me rush out and buy a Kia, because I think the cars are crap. They might last, but - you know - I wouldn't be seen dead in one. I'd rather buy - you know - a car that I like....
F: No. But it shows that the actual manufacturer believes in their own product. Makes you buy into it as well, to buy it.
M: I do, I appreciate, you know from a, you know, we believe in our product so we’ll give it seven years. If Sony did the same, I’d rush out and buy a Sony over a Panasonic. I would. But not Kia.

This quote adds an additional perspective on the findings in the M.E.L study of consumer attitudes to sustainable electronics, where claims about the durability of a washing machine from a brand that consumers were less aware of were not as trusted as claims by a brand with stronger consumer awareness (M.E.L for WRAP, forthcoming). It similarly matches literature reported in Brook Lyndhurst’s research for Defra on catalyst behaviours concerning brand extensions. These are seen to work best where the new or add-on product is immediately identified by consumers as something that the producer has a reputation for or is trusted to have the right skills to deliver.

These findings suggest that the potential relationship between brand and longer product lifetimes may need to be factored into any interventions aimed at working with specific manufacturers to extend product lifetimes. There may, for instance, be certain brands where longer lifetime would be a convincing or attractive consumer proposition and others where it would not make sense to consumers.

7.3.4. Buying products with extended warranties as standard

Investment purchases were often expensive purchases, and as discussed above (6.3.2), expense brought with it an additional element of risk: how could participants be sure that the products they were investing in were going to last?

Apart from trusting in proxies such as brand and quality, an important indication that a product was worth investing in was the length of warranty that the manufacturer was prepared to issue as standard. This was described by some as amounting to a ‘show of faith’ by the manufacturer in their products, as discussed in 6.3.2 above.

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44 Brook Lyndhurst (forthcoming) Exploring catalyst behaviours. Defra.
7.3.5. Purchasing extended warranties or guarantees separately

It was not only warranties which came as standard that attracted some participants when they were considering investment purchases, others were also prepared to protect their investment products by purchasing additional warranties separately, sometimes at quite considerable expense, as the following quote illustrates.

M: We got some sofas and we actually paid like an extra two hundred pounds to Scotchgard them because they're kind of suede, and I tell you, it is the best two hundred quid I have ever spent...The amount of stuff that we spill on, you know, even trying to be careful, and then it just wipes off like that.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London

For more expensive products there was often general agreement in the group discussions as to the good value represented by separately purchased extended warranties. Even participants who generally claimed not to take out extended warranties sometimes did so for investment purchases that they were especially keen to protect.

F: I would rather just pay for a new one if I have to for the sake of it - apart from the computer because that costs a lot of money.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry

However, it is important not to jump to the conclusion that participants who rejected extended warranties were therefore not interested in longer life products. They may have thought instead that warranties were simply too expensive for the service they provided or contained so much restrictive small print that they weren’t worth bothering with (see section 6.5.3 for a fuller discussion on warranties). That said, extended warranties clearly did provide some participants with the ability to prolong the lifetime of their products in a way that they found to be convenient and good value.

This desire to make sure that investment products lasted as long as possible continued after purchase and on into the treatment that the products received in use.
7.4 Taking care of investment products

A key part of participants’ investment behaviour arose from the additional care and attention that they paid to the way in which they used their investment products.

A wide range of general caring behaviours were described by participants in relation to investment products including keeping special clothes or homewares for ‘best’, placing valuable or fragile items in safe places, and cleaning furniture and clothing regularly to keep it looking good. Indeed, some investment purchases had been made with a degree of forethought that meant they had, in part, been chosen for their ability to be cleaned or repaired to maintain their look – and therefore their lives - for longer. This suggests that there may be the potential for interventions aimed at developing product aftercare, partial updates and product service systems, particularly in respect of large items of furniture and carpets.

F: We bought the sofas that are going to last forever because of the way that they have been built and when eventually the fabric shreds they will get recovered, reupholstered.

Group 5, Family, Higher income, Bristol

This pre-purchase planning helped to create a virtuous circle of caring behaviours that had positive effects on product lifetimes. As time went on, the investment mindset acted to reinforce those early decisions to choose a longer lasting product. Products which may have been thought worth taking care of initially simply because they were expensive, over time, may also have developed emotional significance for their owners.

M: You keep something because you have had it so long that it means something more than actually what it does.

Group 1, Living with parents, London

The initial considerations and often financial outlay that went into the purchase of an investment product may have made the value of having it repaired more apparent. There was also evidence to suggest that once repairing behaviours had been started, and positive repair experiences had been encountered, that participants were more willing to ‘invest’ in subsequent repair behaviours. This may have been the result of negative perceptions around repair being overturned, or the result of strengthening emotional attachment to products as investment in repair increased the overall levels of investment in the product.

M: We’ve had our washing machine repaired three times because it is an old fashioned, it is a good, reliable washing machine and even though it has needed to be repaired it is worth the investment of a small outlay every few years to keep it going.

Group 5, Family, Higher income, Bristol

The above quote also reveals that the lifetime of some investment products may also have benefited from the idea held by many participants that over time products had decreased in quality. This rationale would make it all the more important to keep investing in a well-built, reliable older product.
Participants in our groups, on a personal, idiosyncratic basis, were willing to invest time and money in caring for a wide array of specially valued products. Examples came from all the product categories explored - small appliances, major appliances, clothes, electronics and home furnishings. For those investment products, participants appeared to met out exceptional levels of care until the products were either broken beyond repair or until a decision was taken that an update was required.

7.5 Disposing of investment products

As the above section set out, most participants envisaged keeping their investment products for a long time, which may have involved having them repaired or refurbished. However, participants did describe getting rid of their investment products because they were either broken or because they were going to be updated.

As is consistent with the general descriptions of workhorse and up-to-date products given above (across which investment products cut), small appliances and major appliances tended to be discarded because they were broken and all other items tended to be discarded to be updated. In the latter case, it was particularly important for investment products to be found a good home. They really were thought of as being too good to throw away.

Both the underlying attitudes that motivated participants to give unwanted products a good home and the consequent disposal behaviours have been covered in detail in section 5.6 above during the discussion on the second life of up-to-date products.

Working electronic investment items (in particular items such as mobile phones and MP3 players that had been bought by ‘early adopters’ of the technology, that may have been expensive at the time), appeared to be treated slightly differently from other investment products in the sense that there appeared to be a tendency for a few male participants to ‘collect’ them (seen as different to generalised hoarding) for their ‘vintage’ or ‘retro’ appeal and emotional attachment. Even though ‘vintage’ clothing may have also been kept, it may well have been used occasionally or at least it was envisaged that it would be used occasionally. For vintage electronics, however, their future use was not a realistic possibility.

For the sake of completeness it is worth noting here that motivations and behaviours for giving investment products a second life were consistent with a general desire to take care of investment products. It is not that investment products never break or are never updated, it is rather that on the whole they are used for longer than other products before either of these things tends to happen.

It may be that on this basis some investment products are more ‘out of date’ when they are finally disposed of, having been kept for a long time, and therefore they may be more difficult to give a second life to. There was some evidence of this having happened particularly in respect of furniture that did not meet modern fire regulations, although our findings are not fine grained enough to say with any certainty that it was generally the case for investment products as a whole.
### 7.6 Conclusion and implications: investment products

Understanding what motivates most consumers at least some of the time to ‘invest’ in particular products provides insights into a potential future for consumer contributions to longer product lifetimes. If more consumers, more of the time, were to bring an investment mindset to the products they purchased, owned and disposed of, product lifetimes would lengthen, product churn would slow and resources would be used more efficiently.

The key points to bear in mind about investment products from the point of view of developing interventions are that they are:

- valued by their owners and also tend to be valuable – i.e. expensive in monetary terms in both an absolute and relative sense;
- longer lasting than non-investment products, but the reasons participants gave for wanting them to last longer related to the idea that they were ‘special’ to them for a number of reasons. It did not relate to any understanding of or motivations around the resource efficiency implications of keeping products for longer;
- purchased idiosyncratically by consumers, with different products being perceived as investment products by different consumers. However, large items of furniture, expensive electronics and major appliances appeared to be most often talked about in terms of ‘investment’;
- identified during pre-purchase planning using a range of proxies for expected quality, reliability and durability. However, brand appears to be particularly important and warranties were also used by participants to help both judge and product their investment products’ lifetimes;
- invested in not only at purchase but throughout the products’ lifetime: time, effort and money was invested in making sure the right product was found and that it was made to last;
- a sub-set or cross-cut of both workhorse and up-to-date products and as such are susceptible to having their lives ended by both breakdown and updating. However, they would be expected to last longer than an equivalent non-investment product before either of these things happened.

Conceivably, all of the interventions set out above for workhorse and up-to-date products could help contribute to the more widespread development of an investment mindset amongst consumers. Arguably, anything which could be done to help consumers see value in keeping products for longer and to make it easier for them to care for and repair products would foster greater consumer investment in the products they buy, own and dispose of.

The final concluding comments in section 9 draws together the overall research findings with the aim of providing an overview as to how such an investment mindset might be encouraged.
8 Participants’ ideas for making products last longer

In the analysis so far, opportunities for extending product lifetime have been deduced indirectly from the attitudes and behaviours reported by participants with respect to different categories of product. Here we consider directly what participants thought could be done – by manufacturers, retailers or government – to encourage consumers to buy longer lasting products and to keep them in use for longer.

When asked specifically, some participants were able to think of ideas for government interventions in this area. However, a few participants did not see any role at all for government in prolonging product lifetimes.

M: It is no business of government.
Q: No business of government?
M: You know the thought that government would start interfering in stuff like this just fills me with dread because as soon as you get anything like that, you know you get fly tipping and that is not what government is for.
Q: Ok so whose responsibility is it?
M: It is consumers and manufacturers. If the manufacturer produces a decent product that lasts people will buy it. You don’t buy Breville anymore because you have had a bad experience [referring to an earlier conversation]. It is the market place that will work it out not government.

Many others, perhaps unsurprisingly given that most participants were only occasionally concerned with product durability to any significant degree, struggled to think of any suggestions for interventions at all. As a result, this section only considers the opinions of those few participants who did have ideas for government and manufacturers. Findings have been presented largely with a view to helping formulate the parameters of future research. However, it should be noted that, with the exception of discussions involving improvements to warranties, the opinions reported in this section were not voiced widely by participants within or across the discussion groups. It should also be noted that any cost implications for consumers of any of the ideas reported in this section were not discussed in detail and that consumer willingness to pay more for longer lasting products would need further investigation in light of worked-up examples of possible interventions including their potential costs and benefits to the consumer.

This section looks first of all at participants’ suggestions for improvements to warranties – around which the bulk of the discussions centred, then at their suggestions for regulation of manufacturing standards, and finally at ideas for policies they thought could be aimed at influencing consumers directly.
8.1 Making warranties better and cheaper

The issue of improvements to product guarantees and warranties provided fertile ground for participants’ discussions of possible actions that would both help consumers and contribute to longer product lifespans. This was reflective of participants’ very mixed experiences of trying to purchase warranties and then of trying to claim under them, and with their concerns over product lifetimes generally being focussed around products that broke down before they expected them to.

There were suggested roles for both manufacturers and government in improving consumers’ use of warranties to extend product lifetimes. Each is considered in turn.

8.1.1. The role of manufacturers in providing better warranties

Extended warranties offered as standard

The idea that extended warranties could be offered as standard was a popular one amongst participants, when asked what could be done to make warranties better. Suggestions for the length of warranty that should be offered as standard included two, three, five and 10 years.

Q: What could manufacturers or retailers do to encourage you to buy things that last a long time?
F: They are not making them to last a long time.
F: They should definitely extend the warranty for at least three years I think.
M: Yes definitely. That would be a good idea.
F: I would have faith in them if they did that.

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

Extended warranties offered by manufacturers not third parties

It was also specifically suggested by some that manufacturers should be the ones offering the warranty, as opposed to third parties. This was linked to the idea expressed above that manufacturers needed to provide a ‘show of faith’ in their products and to take responsibility for the way they performed, as well as to the perception that manufacturers’ warranties were more trustworthy than those of third parties.

M: If they’re that adamant that their product is that good then they should guarantee it for that length of time and not sell on that warranty to someone else because I think that is where the problem is. If it was under the twelve months and it broke the manufacturers replace it but as soon as it goes under the warranty of the third party, that is when the small print starts to come out and that is when, well actually, no, you’re not covered on this and you are not covered on that. Whereas if it was the actual manufacturers guaranteeing it through the life of the warranty I think I would be a lot more inclined to go out and actually buy.

Group 8, Family, Higher income, Coventry
Extended warranties, if not standard, offered at a ‘reasonable’ price

The high - and at times what was considered to be a disproportionate - cost of warranties was often cited by participants as a barrier to their purchase.

Q: But you said a guarantee is disproportionately expensive because you said it was a quarter of what you paid. What would be a reasonable proportion of the amount that you pay?
M: I think it’s got to be between twentieth and a tenth.
M: Ten percent.
F: Ten percent yes.

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

Reduce the ‘small print’ in warranty agreements

A number of participants felt that they had been caught out by clauses in warranties that did not cover what they needed to have covered. One proposed solution to this was to make the terms and conditions clearer so that purchasers could more easily see the extent of the cover they were buying.

Q: So how could warranties or guarantees be made better?
...
M: Probably give you a little bit more information of what you need to do for the warranty to be covered.
M: Less jargon.
Q: Less jargon?
M: Yes.
M: Yes.
F: And don’t make the smallprint, smallprint.
M: Yes.

Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry

Existing models for improved warranties

Car warranties were also generally well thought of – although annoyance with being caught out by small print did sometimes crop up. In particular, the value of being given a replacement or ‘courtesy’ product while waiting for repairs to be carried out was raised, particularly for relied-upon items such as laptops and mobiles.

Q: So how could warranties or guarantees be made better?
M: They could give you a, if you give them your broken laptop, they should give you a working laptop. It is under warranty, I should have one in my hand.
F: Yes.

Group 2, No/Pre-family, Coventry

8.1.2. The role of government in supporting better warranties

Not all participants thought that manufacturers could realistically be expected to improve the warranties on offer without government intervention or providing incentives to manufacturers to provide longer product guarantees.
Mandatory length warranties as standard

There was some support for the idea of a mandatory length to standard warranties. It was suggested that this kind of approach would force manufacturers to improve the quality of their products.

M: I think they should make it a mandatory three-year extended warranty. So that you knew that what you bought was quality. And therefore if something was broken they [manufacturers] would have to incur the cost which means they don’t do low quality goods.

Group 4, No/pre-family, Higher income, Brighton

Match funding for extensions to warranties

One participant proposed an idea for making extended guarantees more affordable so that more people would buy them, by matching the consumer’s contribution with an equivalent one by government, thereby effectively doubling the duration of a guarantee.

M: If you could have some sort of Government, if they got involved in the guarantee somehow. If they want to say, you know, if you buy a guarantee for an extra year, we will match it. And we will pay for a second year for instance rather than having to keep renewing things. Then effectively you’ve got like a three year guarantee because you get your first year free anyway.

Group 6, Family, Lower income, Newcastle

It is possible this sentiment is not just about cost or affordability but also about a feeling that responsibility for protecting product lifetime could be shared so that the consumer gets a fair deal: if consumers felt their contribution was being matched, it might encourage greater interest in extended guarantees. This fits with current behavioural economics thinking around rewarding citizens for adopting target behaviours, but the prevalence and motivational weight of such a sentiment would need to be researched further.

8.2 Regulating manufacturing standards

Some participants thought that government action was required to encourage manufacturers to produce (or retailers to sell) products that last longer, or to stop selling poorly made products. As discussed above in section 6.4.2, there was a feeling amongst participants that manufacturers would not want to increase product lifetimes without regulation, as they would want to ensure repeat purchases further down the line.

Q: So do you think there’s anything that manufacturers could be doing to make the products you buy last longer?
M: Well they don’t want to, do they?
M: There’s a lot they could do, but it’s not in their interests, is it.

Group 11, Empty Nester, Lower income, Bristol

As a solution to this, some thought that government should intervene and regulate the lifespan of products at the point of manufacture.
M: I think they should investigate manufacturers and their product lifespan, what their predicted lifespans are and have more, more force to be able to change companies from producing, you know, rubbish products that don’t last. And that products should be designed to be recycled and, you know, be taken apart easier and the elements separated so that they can be recycled.

Group 5, Family, Higher income, Bristol

Alternatively, some participants were in favour of changes to the tax system in order to encourage longer lasting products.

M: They could take tax down on the more environmentally friendly ones

Group 3, No/pre-family, Lower income, Manchester

Others suggested import bans on disposable products – although this suggestion was closely linked to the sentiment that there ‘should’ be more British manufacturing (regardless of its quality), a sentiment that was quite commonly expressed by older participants.

F: Well why don’t they ban the imports of things that are so disposable? You’re talking about your cheap kettles. Look at the boxes to see where they come from and you know you are going to be throwing them out in a year.

Group 12, Empty Nester, Higher income, Newcastle

8.3 Government’s role in encouraging consumers to choose longer lasting products

Some participants were aware that policy could be aimed at influencing consumers (the energy labelling scheme was mentioned in several groups in this respect). However, participants did not tend to volunteer suggestions as to how policy could influence consumer choice. In fact, they even cited examples of how government policies had acted against encouraging consumers to keep longer lasting products.

Some government schemes have worked against longer product lifetimes

Some participants mentioned that they felt that government policies such as the boiler and car scrappage schemes and the digital switchover had encouraged or forced people to dispose of items and purchase new ones – sometimes to their considerable annoyance.

F: I mean I find with this whole thing with TV going digital whenever it is, how is the whole nation going to afford to buy a new TV because they have decided to go to digital? I mean, you know, I hate being pressured into buying things.

Group 7, Family, Lower income, London
**Product lifetimes are not amenable to labelling schemes**

The idea of labelling how long something was expected to last was dismissed by one group as impractical, due to the different amounts of use to which a product might be exposed in the hands of different consumers.

*M:* If a workman is using a drill every day, and I only use it once a fortnight - I mean, obviously his is going to wear out quicker than mine. So they could not put the time -

*F:* And likewise with washing machines. Somebody with a family, you know, children and all this would use it far more than what I would.

Group 11, Empty Nester, Lower income, Bristol

### 8.4 Conclusion: participants’ ideas for making products last longer

Overall, when asked directly, most participants had ideas for how government and manufacturers could make products last longer. In fact, superficially at least, they generally appeared to prefer the imposition of a choice infrastructure rather than consumer choice policies – the implication being that manufacturers should just be made to ‘do the right thing’, leaving only ‘good’ choices on offer to them as consumers.

In particular, participants saw a role for government in regulating the quality to which products were manufactured, with a view to minimising built-in obsolescence. This was especially true of appliances (both small and major).

They also thought that government might be able to intervene on their behalf in respect of standardising the length of warranties and in terms of having such warranties offered as standard rather than as an added extra.

However, when it came to thinking of ways in which consumer choice might be influenced, participants offered no explicit suggestions, other than those tied to changes in the way warranties were packaged and presented.

The following concluding section brings together all of our findings to summarise the implications for policy on both consumer choice and choice infrastructure.
9 Conclusions

The research findings presented in the report provide new insights on:

- consumer understanding of product lifetimes, together with consumer motivations and barriers surrounding the purchase and sustained use of more durable products;
- opportunities for engaging consumers in extending product lifetimes, taking into account the consumer motivations and barriers identified in the research.

It is important to bear in mind that these ideas for opportunities are only early suggestions that may be worth further consideration. To turn them into plausible options for policy or communications would require much more deliberation by Defra, engagement with industry stakeholders and further testing with consumers. Some may not be feasible at all; others may need fleshing out in much more specific detail from the general ideas presented here.

The conclusions are organised around the two main research objectives outlined above. They draw out overarching themes then summarise the more detailed conclusions and implications provided at the end of each of the substantive sections in the report which looked at up-to-date, workhorse and investment products.

9.1 Consumer understanding of product lifetimes

A product’s lifetime is determined by a combination of ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’, where a product’s nature is the inherent properties it has – its durability, functionality, reliability or overall quality or performance. When combined with the ‘nurture’ given to it by a consumer, a product’s lifetime will be determined.

‘Nurturing’ behaviour is itself influenced by the experiences, attitudes and expectations that a consumer brings to critical points in a product’s lifecycle: purchase; use (including care, maintenance and repair) and disposal.

The concept of a product lifetime was fluid for each individual and was typically formulated on a case-by-case basis for different products. It comprised a mix of:

- how long participants expected something would last before it broke; and
- how long they wanted it to last before they updated it.

We found that reliability was important for most products (even ones expected to be kept for only a short time) but that in general durability was not important - except when it came to products that people chose to ‘invest’ in.

Detailed analysis of the group discussions revealed that any given participant could hold a number of different, and at times competing, attitudes towards product lifetimes. Within these different attitudes the ‘nature’ and the ‘nurture’ of products took on different relative importance in determining a product’s lifetime.
In seeking to impose order and meaning on the personal, subjective understandings of product lifetimes, we identified themes in participants’ attitudes and behaviour in respect of the different products they talked about:

- Up-to-date
- Workhorse
- Investment

The key characteristics of participants’ attitudes and behaviours in respect of each theme as they relate to each stage of the participant product lifecycle are summarised in the table below.

**Table 7 – Summary table of key characteristics of up-to-date, workhorse and investment categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Up-to-date</th>
<th>Workhorse</th>
<th>Investment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How the product looks is of key importance. Closely related to status, belonging and identity of participants. Clothes, interior accessories, electronics.</td>
<td>How the product functions is of key importance. Major and small appliances, large items of furniture.</td>
<td>Relatively expensive, ‘quality’ important. From any product category – cuts across both workhorse and investment. Most commonly talked of ‘investments’ made in electronics, large furniture and major appliances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime estimate to get value: expect to last reliably for a short period until updated.</td>
<td>Lifetime estimate to get value: expect to last until broken. On average, longer lasting than up-to-date products. Proxies of price, brand and quality used to signify lifetime.</td>
<td>Longer lifetime important: brand reputation key signifier of product worthy of investment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repair usually not an issue unless product breaks before participant ready to update.</td>
<td>Repair considered to extend lifetime but many barriers to repair. Perceived value and convenience of repair low.</td>
<td>Repairs considered and efforts made to take care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warranties sometimes used for electronics but dissatisfaction with inconvenience of going without.</td>
<td>Warranties sometimes used to achieve value, but dissatisfaction with duration, value and service apparent.</td>
<td>Warranties may be used to give peace of mind and also to signify quality as well as to protect product.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants claimed they tried to give ‘perfectly good’ products a second life. But unwanted products could end up in the bin/’tip’ if: product considered unsuitable for second life; a big ‘clear out’ happened; or reuse channel not known about.</td>
<td>Rare second life because workhorse products usually broken on disposal.</td>
<td>Second life envisaged at disposal – but distant possibility at time of purchase. Potential issue of products being too ‘out of date’ to be wanted because kept for so long.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Across all product categories, the predominant concern that participants had when thinking about how long they would want and expect something to last was to achieve good value. In most cases a calculation of price (either of purchase or repair) over expected lifetime was the means by which good value was assessed.

On this basis, the most fundamental barrier to the perceived good value of longer-lasting products amongst participants appeared to be the cheap and disposable nature of many products on offer combined with uncertainty over how long a product could be expected to last. These factors often – although not always – weighted the value calculation in favour of less expensive, shorter-life products when it came to making purchase and repair decisions.

Moreover, in respect of up-to-date products in particular, participants tended to feel they were powerless in the face of updating pressures and the ‘need’ to consume.

Therefore, of central concern to any policy measure seeking to engage consumers in longer product lifetimes has to be the issue of consumer agency.

Overall, participants generally did not appear even to attempt to take responsibility for prolonging the lifetimes of the products they owned. On those occasions where they did try to take responsibility for a product’s lifetime, they reported encountering a number of barriers that frustrated their efforts.

Some of these barriers appear more formidable than others. In particular the easy affordability of new products and the need to be up-to-date present two significant challenges to lengthening product lifetimes and slowing product churn. However, other barriers may be easier to address, including aspects such as consumer knowledge and perceptions of actual product lifetimes, as well as simple actions that could be encouraged to extend the lifetime of products in use. While significant barriers undoubtedly exist, some of the consumer attitudes and behaviours identified in the research, point to various opportunities for positive change.

9.2 Opportunities for engaging consumers

This final section sets out a number of overarching themes which relate to possible interventions before presenting a summary of the main opportunities by the three different themes covered in the detailed analysis.

9.2.1. Starting from where consumers currently are

Opportunities of particular note include an apparent norm around the wrongness of wasting ‘perfectly good’ up-to-date products and consumer annoyance over what they often considered to be the untimely breakdown of workhorse products. In the latter case this feeling appeared to be strengthened by the idea that there was little help on hand, and that neither warranties nor repair services could be relied upon to lengthen product lifetimes.

9.2.2. Help for consumers to reduce the risk of making a poor choice

The risk to consumers of ‘investing’ in products was clearly apparent. They currently have no reliable way of knowing how long products might last when deciding what to buy. This risk could be reduced by taking away the need to rely on the uncertain proxies currently available for judging expected product lifetimes and replacing them with a more objective,
certain and transparent indication of expected functional lifetime (i.e. lifetime as it relates to the nature of the product).

9.2.3. Focus on value

There also appears to be a clear need to improve the value and perceived value of longer-life products and behaviours to prolong product lifetimes. The benefits to consumers of choosing a more expensive, but proportionately longer-life product over a cheaper, shorter-life one must be real and apparent.

9.2.4. Aim for tailored and realistic improvements in product lifetimes

In the case of workhorse products, it may be possible to offer a step change in products’ functional lifetimes, whereas for up-to-date products it may, realistically, only involve a ‘stretching out’ of product lifetimes.

In respect of the former, the findings indicate that there is potential to change both the nature and nurture of workhorse products to an extent that could see the ‘average’ lifetime of workhorse products significantly extended.

In the case of the latter, the fact that the tendency to be ‘up to date’ currently appears so strong and so widespread suggests that smaller changes to the lifetimes of up-to-date products are all that could be realistically aimed for at this point in time.

9.2.5. Improve service performance to help keep products in use

In respect of workhorse products in particular, there appears to be scope for improving services to consumers, including warranties, that effectively and efficiently protect and prolong product lifetimes.

9.2.6. Summary: opportunities identified

On the basis of the findings set out in this report, interventions successfully achieving these outcomes would be expected to give consumers the agency they now lack. In other words, given the right products and services, there appears to be the potential to create both the desire and ability amongst consumers to take responsibility for prolonging the lifetimes of more of their products, more of the time.

The following table concludes by summarising the specific opportunities identified by the thematic analysis of up-to-date and workhorse products. Because investment products cut across both categories of up-to-date and workhorse, they do not have a set of opportunities of their own.

However, it may be the case that some of the opportunities identified are only appropriate to be taken forward with premium products or with brands that have an existing reputation for product durability. Further dialogue with manufacturers and retailers would help to identify whether and if so in which instances, such an approach would be the best way forward.
### Table 8 – Summary table of opportunities for intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interior accessories</th>
<th>Electronics</th>
<th>Clothing</th>
<th>Major appliances</th>
<th>Small appliances</th>
<th>Furniture</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Up-to-date Products</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Manufacture and design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design for repair</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved durability</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Better value spare parts</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modular design for up-dating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved reliability</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Retail</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Promote durable products</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promote ‘anchor’ products</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promote up-to-date accessories and modular parts</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Warranties</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved clarity of contracts</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improved service delivery</td>
<td></td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repairs not replacements</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>More transparent pricing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Product service systems</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop service contracts with consumers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reward product longevity</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop consumer knowledge and understanding of care</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consumer information</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Expected product lifetimes</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Care techniques &amp; DIY</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repair services and parts</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disposal and recycling channels and product acceptability</td>
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<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td><strong>Second hand markets</strong></td>
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<td>Support development</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitating consumer participation in take back and reuse</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Remanufacture and reconditioning</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Support development</td>
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</table>
In working out how the kinds of opportunities set out above could be applied in practice, consideration would need to be given to the role of government in either acting directly or in supporting or engaging with stakeholders to help enable them to take forward actions to extend product lifetimes.

9.2.7. Final thoughts on gaps in evidence and further research

The implications of our research have been lengthy. This reflects the fact that we are at the start of a new ‘policy cycle’, with policy interest in the resource efficiency of longer-lasting products only just beginning to emerge.

The evidence base in this field is still relatively scant, and our findings have identified a number of gaps and potential future research avenues, particularly around the point of interaction between disposal and purchase (be it the purchase of new or second-hand products) which may raise questions for future waste and reuse research:

- What are the average, expected lifetimes of the second lives of up-to-date products and therefore the resource benefits for different products of encouraging continuing use?
- What tends to happen to products at the end of their second lives?
- Are consumer purchase behaviours related to disposal behaviours in any way? Specifically:
  - What, if any, are the resource efficiency implications of hoarding? This question includes a consideration of both the waste and purchase consequences of hoarding. As the evidence currently stands, hoarding appears to have negative consequences from a waste perspective (i.e. products become too old to be of further use), but if hoarders purchase at a slower rate than non-hoarders, hoarding may in fact bring overall resource efficiency benefits. These issues need to be explored further to test the assumption that hoarding is undesirable.
  - Do consumers with waste-averse attitudes and behaviours (perhaps defined using Defra’s segmentation model) purchase products at a different rate to others?

However, our research has also confirmed a number of findings from other work in this area. As a result, a range of clear opportunities for policy interventions have emerged and one possible way of taking work in this area forward would be to shortlist a range of priority options that could be tested for their viability with business stakeholders and their acceptability to consumers.