Circular economy briefing | Clothing

The public sector in the UK procures c£900m clothing per year. Of this, c£410m is textile work wear, which tends to be operational staff uniforms and overalls, and personal protective equipment, such as safety clothing and lab coats. Of this, c£23.8m is bought by universities and colleges through seven university purchasing consortia. University sustainability managers report that work wear is typically disposed of before it has come to the useful end of life, because staff leave their roles, changes to corporate brand, or there is an automatic replacement after a given timeframe. Much of it reportedly goes to landfill, although increasingly it is segregated for textile recycling.

In addition to the seven university purchasing consortia, NUS runs its own purchasing consortium, NUS Services, for its 134 purchasing member students’ unions. c£200k is generated through work wear within the purchasing consortium. This includes short-use items such bar and nightclub uniforms for student staff, and campaigns t-shirts for student officers and students. Across NUS’ membership there are c470 licensed trade venues, and most procure branded clothing for bar staff. Students’ unions report that these items are typically only used 2-3 nights a week over a single eight-month academic year before being disposed of. Some are used for single events, such as serving at graduation balls. For campaigns t-shirts, these typically include officer election campaigns that only last one month, as well as national campaigns, such as government lobbies, voter registration, or NUS Extra card promotions, which only tend to last a few months.

NUS owns one of its main clothing suppliers, Epona Clothing. NUS acquired Epona in 2012 so it could develop the UK’s first living wage range of clothing as part of our commitment to social responsibility. In total, Epona supplies c100,000 souvenir hoodies and c100,000 polo and t-shirts per year.

Regardless of which purchasing consortium is supplying it, there is a demonstrable need to address the wasteful nature of short-use work wear clothing, which is out of sync with the potential duration of the clothing specification. Re-using textiles shows a significant benefit over sending to landfill, and is second only to aluminium in terms of CO2 impact. The Sustainable Clothing Action Plan recognises the potential for clothing leasing to divert textiles from landfill.

* What business models are available for re-using workwear clothing?
* Are there any other models that could be considered in addition to re-use?
* What are the costs associated with these models?
* What policies could be amended/introduced to support these models on a variety of different levels (e.g. national, organisational)?