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Question 1 - What are the key issues facing the NSW waste system?

This submission will deal mainly with the issue of textiles and clothing in the waste stream, although there will be general observations relevant across the waste system. The key issues facing the NSW waste system is the need to effectively and affordably minimise material being sent to landfill. The strategies for this are well-known:

- Avoid the creation of waste where possible and reduce the amount of waste created if avoidance is not possible
- Re-use items that can be re-used as a way of minimising the drain on resources required to produce the products in the first place. This is a key component of the clothing recycling and re-use sector and underpins its business operations. Clothing is collected from its original owner and sold domestically or internationally for re-use as clothing
- Recycle the elements of products that can be recycled and be re-used or converted into new goods/products Again, in the clothing recycling sector, clothing that cannot be reused as clothing can often be recycled for use as cleaning rags
- Recover energy from waste. More research is required for this aspect of the waste hierarchy to be applied to textiles and clothing.
- Treat waste to reduce its impact on the environment. This is not really relevant to textiles and clothing.
- Dispose of waste. At present, more than 500,000 tonnes of textiles and clothing is dumped every year. This figure can be substantially reduced if government works together with the clothing recycling sector to increase awareness of the need and methods of clothing recycling, and to facilitate the collection of clothing to divert from the waste stream.

Question 2 - What are the main barriers to improving the NSW waste system?

In relation to textiles, the main barriers to improving the NSW waste system is the lack of coordination amongst State and local authorities on policies and procedures to support clothing collection/diversion. Rules about the placement and methods of clothing collection - if any exist - vary from council to council, and the NSW Government has no formal position to support or encourage clothing recycling. Unlike most other waste generated in the home (such as glass, paper, cardboard, aluminium, e-waste and chemicals), most councils have no strategy or program specifically to deal with clothing that is no longer wanted. Households are left to make their own arrangements for its use beyond their ownership, with the majority (approximately 23 kilograms per person per year) ending up in landfill.

Question 3 - How can we best reduce waste?

In regard to clothing and textiles, councils should be obliged to demonstrate a coherent and evidence-based strategy and policies for the collection and diversion of clothing from the waste stream. The policies should recognise the business model that currently enables the collection of thousands of tonnes of clothing each year without cost to the consumer, councils or the State government. These policies should support and encourage the growth of collections to enable a substantial increase in the volume of clothing collected and diverted from landfill. The sorts of policies that would facilitate this would include:

- Clothing collection facilities at Community Recycling Centres
- Clothing collection bins on public land, including car parks and train stations

- Community education campaigns to highlight the importance of and methods for collecting clothing for re-use and recycling

Question 4 - How can we recycle better?

Most clothing that is currently collected in NSW is sold as used clothing, either domestically, or internationally. King Cotton Australia's (KCA) overseas buyer re-sells the majority of clothing in developing countries, primarily in Africa and the South Pacific. The balance of clothing that is not resold is converted to rags for use in industrial and cleaning applications and exported back to Australia. Finding other methods to better recycle the components of clothing will require further technical research. KCA as one of Australia's leading clothing recycling operations has been funding research at the University of New South Wales for this purpose. To this end, an MOU has been signed between KCA and UNSW to explore opportunities to convert waste textiles into a composite material suitable for home and office furniture. This type of ongoing research is needed for that clothing which cannot be re-used. The NSW EPA could help with funding for further research into alternative applications for textiles.

Question 5 - What are the main opportunities for improving the NSW waste system?

The EPA needs to help local authorities to develop policies and procedures to better collect clothing for re-use and recycling. The EPA needs to consult widely with peak bodies and major operators in the clothing recycling sector to ensure that policies developed support the continued viability and effectiveness of the sector. Increased collections will result in an increase in the amount of clothing diverted from landfill. Collections can be increased by supporting and promoting collection points on public land such as train stations and car parks. Councils need to be required to be actively managing this issue rather than simply leaving it to operators to make their own arrangements.

Question 6 - Any other information that you would like to contribute to the waste strategy initiative?

The emergence of fast-fashion and the growth in population across NSW will see a continued and rapid growth in clothing waste if this resource is not managed properly. The current collection programs by both charity and non-charity clothing recyclers occur without cost to government, council or consumers. With strong leadership from the NSW Government, and guidelines for local councils, the volume of clothing diverted from landfill can be substantially increased. This increased diversion is consistent with the NSW EPA Waste Hierarchy and will cost the NSW Government, local councils and consumers nothing if managed properly.