

Jane Milburn – The need to create a more sustainable clothing culture

File number: 137/220/701/254

Chairman: I would now like to call on Ms Jane Milburn who will address the Chamber on the need to create a more sustainable clothing culture. Orderly, please show Ms Milburn in.

Welcome, Ms Milburn; the material that you have provided to the Clerks has been distributed to all Councillors. Please proceed; you have five minutes.

Ms Jane Milburn: Thank you; Madam Chairman, LORD MAYOR and Councillors: today you are either wearing natural fibres or synthetic fibres derived from petroleum. Every day we eat and we dress, and in the same way we've become conscious of our food, we are now more conscious of our clothing and what we are wearing. This pinafore was created from rescued wool suits that were one step away from landfill. I'm a natural fibre champion, and I've got a background in issues based communication, and I am now seeking to help create a more sustainable clothing culture.

Thank you for this opportunity. The past decade has seen a transformational shift in where and how our clothing is made, and that raises ethical issues. Consumption is increasing. In two decades, individual annual fibre use across the globe has doubled from seven to 13 kilograms each. That is the average. There has been a fibre change. A decade ago, half of new clothing was natural fibres and half was synthetics. Now, two-thirds of new clothing is synthetics, and research shows that it is shedding micro-plastic particles with every wash.

There is a waste mountain. Charities do a great job with the mass of cast-off clothing, yet only about 20 per cent of donations find a new owner locally; the rest is ragged, dumped or sent overseas. Every year Australia exports 70 million kilograms of used clothing, and it is sold for \$1 a kilo.

There is modern day slavery existing in other parts of the world; that is why our clothing is so cheap. Garment workers are being exploited in developing nations. Rana Plaza showed us that, and it sparked a fashion revolution of which I am part. There is a loss of knowledge; we treat clothing as disposable. There is little understanding of the skill and time involved in making, and there is an inability to even sew on a button or mend a hem that might fall down.

So, global awareness of clothing waste is rising, and responses are emerging. In the UK they have a sustainable clothing action plan run by a resource group called WRAP which works with industry and consumers. They have a 'Love your Clothes' campaign to help consumers buy, use and pass on clothing to reduce textile waste to landfill. This program is extending into Europe with the European Clothing Action Plan. It is a €3.6 million pilot project which aims to ensure less clothing goes to waste, and encourages consumers to buy less and use it for longer.

In the US there is a textile collection system in New York apartments called Wearable Collections, because clothing is not garbage, and San Francisco has a zero textile waste strategy. Wouldn't it be great if we could bring this consciousness to Brisbane and Australia? We recycle paper, glass, metal, plastic, probably other things as well, but there is an opportunity to be more proactive with textiles. We need leadership to help create that sustainable clothing culture. I am just one person, and I am trying to create change through my actions. I launched Textile Beat at a Green Heart fair in 2013. I do talks and workshops; I share this slow fashion manifesto. I hope that, by being here today, it is the start of a broader sustainable clothing conversation that can help build on Brisbane's great sustainability ethos. Thank you.

Chairman: Thank you, Ms Milburn.

Councillor McLACHLAN, would you care to respond, please?

Response by Councillor David McLACHLAN, Chairman of the Field Services Committee

Councillor McLACHLAN: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Jane, for coming in today. It is a bit of a hard act to follow, after the previous speaker, and it is a very serious subject, but we thank you for coming in here today to talk about the issues that you are so passionate about. We share your passion for reuse and recycling. It is probably fair to say, though, we probably haven't applied ourselves as fulsomely as we could have to textiles. You have given us some serious food for thought.

At our waste transfer stations, we do have receptacles for clothing, for textiles, but I think it is fair to say we probably don't promote it as well as we should. I think with the booths that are around the city that are disappearing because they are generally abused, the receptacles that are provided in little shopping centres for clothing for the charities have essentially been taken out in a lot of locations unfortunately. I think we do have to recreate the culture of reuse of those clothes.

I will certainly make it part of my mission, as the Chair of Field Services, and responsible for waste and resource recovery, to look at what we can do to help promote the cause of textile reuse. We see about 4 per cent of what ends up in landfill is textile related, and that is too much. Anything we can do to drive down that sort of proportion of clothes that are simply being thrown away is a good thing.

It is probably fair to say, though, that when people go to our transfer stations with a trailer load of materials, they probably aren't thinking that that is a good location to offload the old wardrobe of clothes. That is something that we can probably draw attention to, to make sure that people are aware that we do have that facility at the transfer stations.

We met, I think, on the night of the Sustainable Cities awards where you spoke at City Hall with a similar message. That was following the Recreate Twilight Markets that were out here in City Hall, which is a great event, drawing attention to recycling of paper in particular. I think it would be great if we continue to have that sort of event around National Recycling Week to provide an opportunity for a catwalk presentation of refashioned clothes, and something I can certainly talk to you offline about what we can do for our event next year.

But thank you very much for coming in today. Thank you for your passion for reuse, recycling. I am in the Carl Stefanovic school of suits, so one suit worn lots, but I dry clean it from time to time. I am not too sure about Carl. But I do think that that is an important message, that we don't necessarily need to be buying lots of new clothes all the time, and thank you for bringing that message here today to City Hall.

Chairman: Thank you, Ms Milburn.