

CIE-MAP

Centre for Industrial Energy, Materials and Products

Raising consumer demand for longer lasting products: challenges and opportunities

Main findings

- » Increasing uptake of longer lasting products has the potential to reduce carbon emissions, foster sustainable consumption and contribute to a circular economy, while supporting the UK Government's economic and environmental aspirations in its industrial and clean growth strategies.
- » Consumer expectations of product lifetimes appear to have declined over the past 25 years, and are lower than those of their European counterparts.
- » Evidence of generally high levels of satisfaction with product lifetimes, with a mean satisfaction level of 81% across a range of durable goods, suggests a need for government and business-led initiatives to encourage the uptake of longer lasting products.
- » Substantial consumer interest in longevity, reliability and guarantee length could be supported through measures such as mandatory lifetime labelling and longer guarantees.
- » In order to increase consumer uptake of longer lasting products and lengthen use times interdisciplinary research is required, informed by fields of enquiry such as behavioural economics, marketing, social psychology and social practice theory.



This briefing outlines the benefits of increasing consumer demand for longer lasting products and details the challenges to and opportunities for them to contribute to environmentally-sound, sustainable economic development.

Longer lasting products

In recent years, there has been a growing perception among academics, policymakers and the public that the lifetimes of durable goods are in decline.¹ Drivers such as fashion, advances in technology and the rise of the 'throwaway society' decrease product lifetimes and exert a detrimental impact on sustainability concerns such as climate change and poverty.²

As materials embody carbon, increasing product longevity encourages emissions reductions, thereby addressing climate change, while fostering good stewardship of natural resources.^{3,4} Moreover, activities that support longer product lifetimes, such as rental, repair and maintenance services, could add 7.9 billion euros annually to the European economy.⁵

The contribution of longer lasting products to sustainable development

Increased consumer uptake of longer lasting products would reduce energy and material demand and promote better stewardship of natural resources. In turn, this would improve resource productivity and thereby support the UK Government's industrial strategy⁶, clean growth strategy⁷ and 25 Year Environment Plan.⁸

Challenges to increasing the uptake of longer lasting products

Our review of previous research into consumer expectations of product lifetimes identified that:⁹

- Generally, consumer expectations of durable goods' lifetimes in the United Kingdom appear to have declined in the last twenty years.
- British consumers appear to have lower lifetime expectations across many durable goods than some of their European counterparts.

However, variations in research methods, products studied, and questions posed make drawing detailed comparisons difficult. Our recent research has illustrated high levels (77%-85%) of consumer satisfaction with current product lifetimes across an exhaustive range of durable goods.¹⁰ This may illustrate that:

- British consumers seem to have become accepting of shorter-life durable goods, as satisfaction with product lifetimes¹¹ reflects an apparent decline in consumer expectations of the lifetimes of durable goods.⁹
- Efforts to increase the uptake of longer lasting products should focus on government and business-led strategies.¹⁰



Understanding consumer behaviour

Previously, policy approaches to changing consumer behaviour have been influenced by psychological and economic understandings of human behaviour.¹² However, these strategies have not always proved to be effective as they fail to account for contextual variables, personal and group differences, and rebound effects, among other factors.

To address these shortcomings, it has been recognised that an interdisciplinary approach to behaviour change is required, drawing from insight across diverse fields such as behavioural economics, marketing, social psychology and social practice theory.^{3,13} An integrated approach would be more effective in increasing consumer uptake of longer lasting products, lengthening use times, encouraging repair when durable goods break, and reuse, remanufacturing and recycling as alternatives to product discard.

Opportunities for increasing the uptake of longer lasting products

Despite apparent consumer acceptance of shorter product lifespans, our research shows that consumers still consider product longevity, reliability and guarantee length to be important.^{10,14} These findings could be addressed by:

- Developing standardised lifetime labels for durable goods, as these have been found to be popular with consumers.¹⁵
- Legislating for mandatory lifetime labelling and minimum guarantee periods beyond current norms across the European Union, where consumer goods have a minimum legal guarantee against faults of two years.¹⁶

Enabling greater provision of reuse and repair services could considerably lengthen the lifetimes of durable goods, reducing detrimental impacts from untimely breakage, discard and disposal. This, in turn, would support efforts to realise a circular economy by:

- Improving reverse logistics for the refurbishment, remanufacture and resale of second-hand goods.¹⁷⁻¹⁹
- Increasing community repair provisions.^{20,21}

Innovation in business models, such as providing services instead of products, could enable products to be utilised more efficiently and intensively across their lifetime.^{13,22,23}

Product design has a crucial role in increasing both the lifetimes and consumer uptake of durable goods. Our research has identified the potential of design interventions to improve material efficiency and extend lifetimes across a range of consumer goods.²⁴

Conclusion

Encouraging and enabling consumers to use their durable goods for longer, or choose longer lasting products at the point of purchase, offers economic, environmental, and social benefits. Consumers benefit from longer lasting products through having reliable durable goods which meet their needs and represent value for money, while such products reduce energy and material demands over time, supporting sustainable consumption and the circular economy.

There are clear opportunities for business and government to facilitate the uptake of longer lasting products through the use of lifetime labelling and longer guarantee periods. Additionally, strategies to support reuse and repair would serve to increase the lifetimes of products already in use. Longer lasting products have the potential to support key environmental and economic policy agendas in the UK and beyond. Further research could explore opportunities to maximise the benefits of longer lasting products and inform approaches to increase their uptake with consumers.



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Working closely with government and industry, CIE-MAP conducts research to identify all the opportunities along the product supply chain that ultimately deliver a reduction in industrial energy use.

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