

MPs investigate fast fashion climate crisis

Is it wrong to buy a £2 T-shirt? The government has launched a probe into the UK's throwaway fashion culture. Millions of items are binned every year – doing great damage to the environment.

Worldwide, one truckload of clothes is sent to landfill or incinerated every second.



Waste: In the UK alone, 300,000 tonnes of clothes are sent to landfill every year.

A £2 T-shirt, a £5 dress and a pair of £7 jeans. These might seem like great bargains, but low prices are hiding a huge hidden cost.

At least, that is the claim of MPs who are investigating the environmental impact of “fast fashion”.

The term refers to clothes that are produced in bulk quantities quickly and cheaply. Think high-street stores like **Primark**, or fashion websites like Boohoo and Misguided.

According to MP **Mary Creagh**, their low prices mean that consumers do not “treat [clothing] with any respect and at the end of its life it's going to go in the bin.”

Indeed, this is the fate for a staggering number of clothes. Last year, people in Britain sent **235 million** items to landfill. Across the world, one truckload of clothing is wasted every second.

This, in turn, only fuels more consumption. On average, people in Britain buy 26.7 kilograms of new clothes per year, the highest of all European countries.

The industries that fuel this throwaway culture are a key driver of climate change.

In 2015, the global fashion industry emitted **1.2 billion tonnes** of carbon emissions.

Producing raw materials like cotton, manufacturing the items, and stock transportation add up to a big carbon footprint – in fact, only oil companies produce more pollution.

The environmental impact does not stop there. Many garments are made from cheap synthetic materials. When these are washed they release thousands of tiny microplastic fibres.

Last year, a **report** calculated that half a million tonnes of this plastic is released into the ocean every year, the equivalent of over 50 billion plastic bottles.

Despite these negative impacts, change is coming. For example, several new start-ups let people rent clothes instead of buying them, which some hope will lead to less waste.

Others want to revolutionise the industry as a whole: imagining a **circular economy** which prioritises recycling instead of the “take-make-dispose” model that currently exists.

Is it wrong to buy a T-shirt for £2?

Threadbare

Definitely, some argue. By supporting fast fashion with your wallet, you are supporting environmental destruction and worker exploitation. Buying longer-lasting items instead may even save you money in the long run. Furthermore, having fewer clothes makes you take better care of the items you already have. We must end Britain's fast-fashion culture.

No, others respond. Cheap clothes are essential for people on a budget, and we should not judge people negatively who need to save money. Furthermore, fashion is constantly changing. Young people, in particular, feel the need to keep up with the latest trends. Ultimately, it is the companies who should be forced to make clothes in a sustainable way.

Q & A

Q: What do we know?

A: In the UK, people spend £52.7 billion on fashion every year. Most of this goes on clothing (£4.5 billion is spent on accessories). The amount of items bought has risen in recent

years, from 950,000 tonnes in 2012 to 1.13 million in 2016. Furthermore, the carbon footprint of the clothes worn in the UK was 26 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2016 – a 9% rise compared to 2012.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Exactly what the future holds for the fashion

industry. One study expects the sector's emissions to rise by 60% by 2030, and to expend one quarter of the world's carbon budget by 2050. Others are more optimistic, expecting technologies like 3D printing and artificial intelligence to make the industry more sustainable.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is it wrong to buy a T-shirt for £2?
2. Should we all rent our clothes instead of buying them?

ACTIVITIES

1. Think about all the clothes you currently own. As a percentage, how many of these items do you no longer wear? Discuss with your classmates. Did you come up with similar percentages? Think of some ways in which you could dispose of your unwanted clothes in a sustainable way.
2. Do some further research into the environmental impact of the fashion industry (use the Become An Expert links to help). List all the ways that clothing affects the environment. Think about: how the raw materials are made, how clothes are distributed across the economy, and how clothes are used during their lifetime. Present your findings to the class.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it."
Robert Swan

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Primark – A spokesperson for the brand insisted that its low prices are a result of spending little on advertising and tight margins. "It's our business model that takes us to a £2 T-shirt," said Paul Lister.

Mary Creagh – Head of the Commons

Environmental Audit Committee (EAC), which is leading the investigation into fast fashion.

235 million – According to a survey commissioned by the supermarket Sainsbury's.

1.2 billion tonnes – According to the report, "A new textiles economy: Redesigning fashion's future," by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

Report –

See above.

Circular economy – A system in which waste and emissions are reduced. This can be achieved through various methods, including durable product design, repair, recycling and upcycling.

26.7 kilograms – According to the Textiles Recycling Association.

BECOME AN EXPERT

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 Notes

