

## WHAT IS PROMPT?

It is a research project which pushes for products to be designed to last. PROMPT stands for “**P**remature **O**bsolence **M**ulti-stakeholder **P**roduct **T**esting programme”. It is being run between 2019 and 2023 by a consortium of consumer groups, researchers and repair specialists.<sup>1</sup> To pave the way for better products and spur the development of new legislation, partners are setting up an independent testing programme to assess the lifetime of consumer products.



## WHY IS IT NEEDED?

Consumers want longer lasting products, and feel that their products tend to break much earlier than they should.<sup>2</sup> Also, some products just cannot be repaired.<sup>3</sup> But products are also not used for as long as they could be, because consumers abandon them for newer versions.

Think of a washing machine which won't start, a refrigerator which leaks shortly after purchase, a functioning phone sitting in a drawer because you were offered a new one, or a broken coffee machine with no spare parts available: the list goes on. Manufacturers and consumers alike need to reconcile those issues to make products last longer.

In the EU, discarded fridges, computers, printers and coffee machines are one of the fastest growing waste streams, rising by 2% per year. The early replacement of products puts a strain on consumers' budgets and on our natural resources, leading to overconsumption of materials for manufacturing new products.

The phenomenon of products not used for as long as they should is called 'premature obsolescence'. To tackle this, better design and reliable information on product durability are crucial.



## WHICH PRODUCTS ARE MOST LIKELY TO BREAK EARLY?

Consumers can signal faulty products on online platforms available in seven countries.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of the platforms' results, together with environmental and market considerations, the PROMPT project is focusing on four product categories for its testing programme: smartphones, washing machines, televisions and vacuum cleaners.

Consumers' complaints across Europe point to the same issues:<sup>5</sup>

- **Small consumer electronics:** mobile phones come first, with battery and touch-screen failures ranking top.
- **Software can also be a problem:** some phones on sale are designed four years before purchase and come equipped with obsolete operating systems.<sup>6</sup>
- **Electronic control failures** for large home appliances, such as washing machines are often complained about.

Some phone subscriptions offer a new phone every year to reward customer loyalty. This leads to consumers discarding phones that work perfectly fine.

<sup>1</sup> **National consumer groups:** Consumentenbond (NL), OCU (ES), Stiftung Warentest (DE), Test Achats/Test Aankoop (BE), UFC-Que Choisir (FR); **Umbrella consumer groups:** ANEC, BEUC, International Consumer Research and Testing; **Research institutes:** Delft University of Technology, Fraunhofer Institute for Reliability and Microintegration; **Repair enterprises:** RUSZ and iFixit.

<sup>2</sup> A 2013 poll by Austrian consumer group VKI showed that 55% of consumers believed that manufacturers intentionally shorten product lifetime.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, [Circular Economy Action Plan](#), 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Belgium : [Trop vite usé/Te rap kapot](#); France : [Observatoire des pannes](#), Italy : [Insieme per prodotti duraturi](#), Portugal: [Juntos contra a obsolescência prematura](#) ; Spain [Barometro de la obsolescencia prematura](#) ; Germany ; Netherlands [Kapot apparaat](#)

<sup>5</sup> Testimonies presented in this factsheet were collected through the platform: <https://prompt-project.eu/results/consumer-feedback>

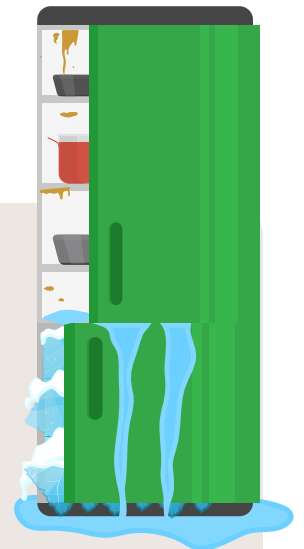
<sup>6</sup> Which Computer – 'Is your Android phone ready for retirement?' - February 2020

"I could unlock my **phone** without the burden of typing a password, just using facial recognition, code, fingerprint and patterns. Then, I was asked for a password out of nowhere. I sent it back to the manufacturer who kept it for three weeks!"  
A consumer from Belgium

"My **washing machine** was leaking, [...] so I called the brand's after-sale service. The next day the manufacturer sent me a cost estimate without even examining the product... This means it is a well-known problem."  
A consumer from France



"A repairer came over to my place and told me it wasn't worth fixing my **washing machine** because the repairing costs would amount to approximately €350. I didn't have it fixed and I bought a new one."  
A consumer from Spain



## WHAT IS THE ADDED VALUE OF PROMPT COMPARED TO EXISTING TESTS?

Assessing product durability is nothing new to consumer organisations, as testing is part of their DNA. They assess the robustness of products (through consumer surveys and the durability testing of devices) which allows the identification of some aspects of product obsolescence. Yet, we lack the full picture on premature obsolescence. For example, there is no protocol to assess how a software update can affect products durability or how repairable a product is.

With PROMPT, consumer organisations aim to develop a fully-fledged testing programme that allows:

- Fast screening of unreliable product designs or parts
- Scanning for product features that influence reparability and reuse
- Identification of product features which push consumers to abandon a still-functioning product.

This EU-wide testing programme will not only help consumers to choose products wisely, but also incentivise companies to design and produce longer-lasting products.

The results from the project – especially on the societal/psychological side of obsolescence – will feed BEUC's EU policy demands to tackle premature obsolescence (see our factsheet: <http://bit.ly/earlyjobs>), and aid ANEC in its contributions to technical standards on consumer products.

To learn more about the project's latest news: <https://prompt-project.eu/news/>



The Project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement no. 820331.



July 2020