



FACTSHEET

Premature obsolescence when products fail too quickly

What is premature obsolescence?

Printers or smartphones that cannot be fixed shortly after the guarantee expires, electric toothbrushes that break down too quickly, coffee machine spare parts that are unavailable... Many consumers have to deal with the early failure of products, also called 'premature obsolescence'.

Belgian consumer organisation Test Achats/Test Aankoop set up a [platform](#) to flag products that break too quickly. There were over **5,400** reports during the first 5 months.

What are the consequences?

1. **Financial:** consumers end up having to replace their appliances with new ones more quickly than they had planned.
2. **Environmental:** products that fail earlier than expected produce waste and put an increasing pressure on natural resources that are becoming scarce.

Why don't goods last as long as expected?

- Sometimes products are **designed** in a way which does not facilitate repair (e.g. parts went from screwed to glued).
- When spare parts are unavailable, they make **repair impossible**.
- **High repair costs** often make a new purchase the only viable option.
- The product may fail after a **pre-set number of uses**.¹
- **Marketing practices** usually encourage consumers to replace their fully functional products.²

What do manufacturers say?

In 2013, our Austrian member VKI polled around 800 consumers: 55% believed that manufacturers intentionally and systematically shorten the lifetime of products.

For decades, companies have been disputing the very concept of planned obsolescence, claiming no one has ever proven it exists.

If durability was a top concern of manufacturers, why would some of them design smartphones with non-replaceable glued-in batteries or not provide crucial software updates shortly after purchase?

¹Kaufen für die Müllhalde. Das Prinzip der geplanten Obsoleszenz, Jürgen Reuss & Cosima Dannoritzer, 2013.

²Geplanter Verschleiß. Wie die Industrie uns zu immer mehr und immer schnellerem Konsum antreibt – und wie wir uns dagegen wehren können, Christian Kreiss, 2014.



And politicians?

Fortunately, decision makers increasingly recognise that we cannot continue producing so much waste. In parallel, there are companies which are now taking this seriously and increasingly designing their products with durability as a factor. In its 'circular economy' agenda, the European Commission acknowledges it is essential to make products more durable, repairable, upgradeable, re-usable and recyclable.³ EU decision makers also see the Ecodesign Directive as a tool that not only strives to improve the energy efficiency of consumer goods but also their durability.

In 2017, the EU Parliament adopted a report to tackle the issue in Europe.⁴ BEUC deplored that the Parliament did not call strongly on the European Commission to propose mandatory measures.

What does BEUC call for?

Products should not fail prematurely or last shorter than consumers can reasonably expect.

- **Durability should be in the DNA of product design.** Ecodesign rules aim to make some products greener from the design phase. We could make the most of this tool if the EU systematically included durability requirements on top of energy-using requirements.
- **Lifetime information should be provided at the point of sale.** Consumers need to know about the expected lifetimes of products and related costs, repair options and availability of spare parts when they are shopping. It would help them choose the products that suit them better.
- **Consumers need stronger guarantee rights.** The legal guarantee period is two years by law, but because the burden of proof switches after six months, in practical terms, it means that the burden of proof for the product's lack of conformity lies with the seller for only the first six months. Afterwards, it shifts to the consumers, who often struggle to get their rights enforced. The burden of proof should stay on the trader's shoulders for two years, as proposed by the Commission.⁵
- **Products with longer lifespan should get longer guarantee.** The 2-year period is inappropriate for long-lasting appliances such as washing machines, audio-visual devices, or cars. In short, guarantees should match the expected lifetime of a product.
- **Spare parts should become available and affordable.** That way, consumers can have their broken washing machine or printer repaired instead of having to buy a new one. Spare parts and repair manuals should be available for a fixed-term period or for a duration that reflects the product's expected lifetime.
- **Software updates should be available for longer.** Also, consumers should be informed at the time of purchase about how long updates will be available for.
- **We need a new culture of repair.** EU policy makers should actively support local repair initiatives as they also create local green jobs and provide a useful service to consumers.

³ In 2015, the EU Commission published a new Circular Economy package to "[boost competitiveness, create jobs and generate sustainable growth](#)".

⁴ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2017-0287&language=EN&ring=A8-2017-0214> | <http://www.beuc.eu/press-media/news-events/one-small-step-closer-longer-lasting-consumer-products>

⁵ on the EU rules on legal guarantee rights for the sales of tangible goods