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Careful what you flush away – it could cause your home to flood!

Students from Northumbria University, Newcastle have demonstrated their problem-solving skills for business partners by developing a range of behavioural change initiatives to help Northumbrian Water tackle blocked sewers and flooding.

Strategies, ideas and designs created by the post-graduate Multi-Disciplinary Innovation (MDI) team, based at Northumbria's INNOVATE hub have just been presented to senior managers at the company, with a number of recommendations set to be implemented.

Flushing the wrong items down the toilet or using the kitchen sink to dispose of waste such as cooking fat can block drains and lead to flooding, causing misery for those households affected. However, as the problem is largely invisible until disaster strikes, persuading customers to act differently is challenging.

Tasked with helping to solve this problem, the MDI students identified four themes to support behaviour change; a utility app, animated games, a disposable bin and a series of roadshows. All solutions were heavily research-informed, fully costed and designed to complement Northumbrian Water's already successful love your drain campaign.

Elaine Erskine, Technical Strategy Manager, from Northumbrian Water said: "We talk to our customers about the devastating impact flooding can have and over the years we have made significant investments and fundamental changes to processes to support our customers when flooding does occur.

"Changing behaviour is critical to prevent flooding so it's important to talk to customers about the cause. Working with the MDI team on our love your drain campaign has provided us with fresh perspectives on how to engage with customers and we've been hugely impressed with their work.

"We look forward to continuing work with the MDI team to bring some of these projects to life."

Lucy Winskell OBE, Pro Vice-Chancellor at Northumbria University Business Engagement, added: "Through our INNOVATE hub we engage with a number of businesses, bringing together world-class academic researchers from all faculty disciplines and energy-charged students to solve problems or help open up new commercial opportunities. It's all provided under one roof in an incredibly creative environment. The work of the MDI team, along with programme leader Dr. Nick Spencer, is an ideal example of this working in practice and having real positive impact.

"It's worth adding that this initial project was completed in just three weeks, so I am confident that a more permanent collaboration will yield even greater results. And as we already work with a number of businesses, from multi-nationals to local SMEs, there are also powerful synergies for our partners to benefit from."

The Northumbrian Water project was undertaken initially by under-graduates on the BA (Hons) Design for Industry course. Having laid the groundwork it was then passed to the MDI team at INNOVATE.

INNOVATE offers businesses easy access to interdisciplinary teams of leading academics and students, all through one door and under one roof. It's a unique way of tapping into a powerful cross-university knowledge base. For more information on working with INNOVATE please contact Bruce Watson at bruce.watson@northumbria.ac.uk or on tel: 0191 227 4300

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Contacts



Rik Kendall

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law

rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk

07923 382339