

Facing an e-waste mountain

By Tom Geoghegan
BBC News Magazine

Nearly every time a new electrical item is bought, an old one needs disposing of. But are we doing so properly?

Four million phones have been sold this Christmas, which means another four million are probably no longer used.

Most are destined for the rubbish bin, with the potato peelings and chocolate wrappers. And like all household waste, they end up in the ground.

Teenagers get a new phone every 11 months, adults every 18 months. A total of 15 million handsets are replaced each year.

It is estimated that 200 million electrical items per year end up in non-hazardous landfill sites, so there could be six billion items buried across the UK.

We're in danger of seeing another fridge situation developing

Phil Conran
Biffa Waste Services

Electrical items are not dangerous while they're in one piece, but in the ground toxic substances like nickel, cadmium or lead can leak out. Special hazardous landfills protect against this.

Only 15% of mobile phones are recycled, partly because people are unaware of schemes such as Fonebak, which repairs phones and redistributes them around the world. If they're beyond repair, then the gold and plastic can be extracted. Other electrical goods can be collected by the council.

An EU directive known as WEEE which comes into force next August places the onus on electrical manufacturers to recycle items returned to them. But consumers are not duty-bound to return items.

THE PROBLEM WITH PCs...

The average lifespan of a computer has fallen from 4-6 years in 1997 to two years in 2005

Computers have more than 1,000 materials, including toxic gases, toxic metals, biologically active materials, acids and plastics

Televisions and computer monitors contain cathode ray tubes, which contain lead oxide and barium, and the

screen glass is coated with cadmium
There are currently no UK facilities for recycling cathode
ray tubes so they should go to hazardous waste landfills

Phil Conran from Biffa Waste Services says the waste industry is not ready to deal with the increase in demand because the government has not converted the EU directive into a set of UK regulations.

"The difficulty we have is investing in something which at this stage is largely unknown. We don't know the standards, we don't know when and we don't know how. We're in danger of seeing another fridge situation developing."

Recently, in Manchester, 120,000 fridges stacked up because the contractor which collected them went bust and left them dumped in a storage yard.

Claire Wilton, senior waste campaigner at Friends of the Earth says: "It's a rapidly growing waste stream, faster than average household waste because people are continually replacing out-of-date equipment."

...AND PHONES

Mobile phones contain toxic substances such as mercury
and cadmium
They have short shelf lives as fashions and technology
change
15 million phones are replaced each year
Fonebak recycles old mobile phones

One proposal put to ministers, she says, is for a national clearing house which will be responsible for a system of collection points throughout the country, with electrical companies sharing the duty of taking the goods away.

"We like this as an idea but the plans have yet to be drawn up in enough detail for us to be confident. Eight months is not very long so the government has to get its skates on to meet the deadline next year."

Electrical firms say the directive will cost the industry huge amounts - one estimates 30m euros a year every year.

Goods racket

Fujitsu has been recycling second-hand computers for a long time, says Joy Boyce from Intellect, which represents electrical manufacturers. But the problem is it can't control items finding their way into the hands of brokers who ship what they can't refurbish to the developing world.

There are steps already being taken in the design and content of electrical goods to make them more environmentally friendly. Elements like chromium, lead and cadmium are being eliminated from all products in the EU by 2006.

"A lot of those hazards are being designed out," she says. "There's an awful lot happening. It's not all bad news. There's a lot of good news too."

A BBC Five Live investigation found that unscrupulous waste dealers are involved in a lucrative but illegal racket sending goods abroad to the developing world.

In parts of China and India, workers are exposing themselves to dangerous substances as they break down by hand the items imported from Europe and the US.

Many are poorly paid and wear no protective clothing or masks. The penalties for this kind of trade are stiff but the authorities have difficulty tracing the source because the goods come via the Middle East, where the documentation is altered.

The Environment Agency says enforcement measures at British ports have been successful and are being stepped up.

To illustrate the size of the e-waste problem, the Royal Society of Arts is building a sculpture - weighing three tonnes and standing seven metres tall - to represent the quantity an individual disposes of in a lifetime.

The "WEEE man" will be displayed on London's South Bank before touring Cornwall, South Wales, Newcastle, Glasgow and France.

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