

The war on waste

Energy Minister, Malcolm Wicks, discusses the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive

Waste is a growing problem affecting us all. Everyone has heard the reports of the increasing demands on landfill sites, and the limited availability of new sites. Electrical waste is the fastest growing waste category in the EU. Last year two million tonnes of electrical waste was generated in the UK alone, enough to fill the new Wembley Stadium six times over.

It is clear that the way we dispose of it is not sustainable. Of course, some responsible businesses already recognise and actively ensure that the electrical waste that they produce does not get dumped. Indeed, they recognise that in this age products need to be efficient, re-usable, safe after use, and don't contribute to waste problems.

However, we need to ensure that all businesses are following this good environmental practice. That's why from 1 July, new regulations implementing the WEEE Directive in the UK have required producers to take responsibility for the environmental impact of their products when they become waste.

The regulations are one of a small number of EU "Producer Responsibility" Directives, which aim to address the environmental impact of waste products – in this case electrical and electronic equipment, one of the fastest growing waste streams in the UK and in the EU. Business needs to comply with the new legislation and will be penalised for failing to do so if they have had the chance to understand and act on the new rules. We have taken additional time to work closely with business to ensure that in developing these regulations they are effective and proportionate.

A huge range of electrical and electronic products are affected by the new WEEE regulations - including household appliances, IT and telecommunications devices, audio visual equipment, lighting, tools, toys, leisure goods and sports equipment. Currently the majority of these products are taken to landfill at the end of their life. Not only is it very bulky, but if disposed of incorrectly, hazardous substances from electrical

equipment can leak into the ground causing wider environmental damage such as soil and water pollution.

Our aim is to encourage the separate collection of waste electrical and electronic goods so that more can be reused, treated and recycled and less goes to landfill. Putting the responsibility on the electrical industry will mean the eventual recycling of products being considered at design stage, it will incentivise the industry to provide consumers with more options for returning old products, it will encourage the re-use of products and it will help create a valuable market in recycled materials.

The new regulations apply to all companies who import, manufacture or re-brand electrical equipment in the UK. The regulations also affect everyone who uses, sells, treats and disposes of WEEE. From July this year consumers will have started to see changes in the information available to them when buying new electrical products and new signage at their local council refuse centres and in shops.

Producers are required to mark products with the crossed out wheeled bin symbol to encourage consumers to separate electrical from general waste. They also have to register with a compliance scheme and to finance the costs associated with the treatment recovery and recycling of WEEE.

Distributors, including distance sellers, have to provide free take-back facilities for old equipment when a customer buys a replacement item. They can allow customers to bring goods back to the store - which must have appropriate storage facilities - and are required to report on the amount of goods returned and make arrangements for them to be taken to a treatment facility.

Alternatively, distributors can join the Distributor Take-back Scheme (DTS) – www.valpak.co.uk/dts – which supports a network of primarily local authority collection points where customers can return their waste electricals. Over 2,550 retailers have opted to do this and currently membership of the scheme represents more than 75 per cent of UK electrical retailing by sales.

Whether they provide take-back facilities or are members of the DTS, all electrical retailers must make information available to the consumers on how they can dispose of WEEE and the environmental benefits of doing so.

The regulators' overall priority will be to ensure that everyone affected by the WEEE Regulations is aware of their new responsibilities, and is able to meet them. Distributors can find out more about what they need to do to comply with the regulations from the VCA, the regulator for the distributor obligations – www.vca.gov.uk. For advice about the producer obligations, producers should contact relevant environment agency for England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Together with the regulators, we will continue to work with industry and other parties to ensure that the requirements and impacts of the WEEE legislation are fully understood and establish an effective system in the UK. A year ago, when the Government announced its proposals to implement the WEEE Directive, we set a challenging implementation timetable, giving notice that the Directive would be implemented on 1 July 2007. I am pleased to say we kept to that timetable and that the UK can now start to enjoy the benefits which flow from the regulations – which are good for the consumer, responsible producers and the environment.



Malcolm Wicks: "The UK can now start to enjoy the benefits which flow from the regulations."