E-waste
BRIEFING

CONSERVATIVE
ENVIRONMENT
NETWORK

- **Electronic waste (e-waste) is a rapidly growing waste stream in the UK.** The UK is the world's second largest per person producer of e-waste. Insufficient amounts of e-waste are currently correctly disposed of, recycled, or reused. The rapid development of technology and the lower costs associated with electronics, combined with consumers' desire for the latest product, has led to this rise in e-waste.
- **More needs to be done by the government to tackle e-waste.** Reforms proposed by the previous government to increase e-waste collection and recycling rates have not been carried out due to the general election. Since then, Labour has made waste one of its top five priorities for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). There are no further details of the policies that the government will pursue.
- **Local authorities have a role to play in tackling e-waste.** This briefing will explore some of the ways you can help, including introducing e-waste collection points across your community, running awareness campaigns, partnering with relevant organisations and hosting repair cafés in council-owned sites.

Background

- **E-waste, or waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE), refers to discarded electrical or electronic devices.** E-waste covers a wide range of products, including consumer electronics like phones, laptops, screens, home appliances, cables, vapes, and batteries. Although sometimes able to be repaired and resold, many of these items become e-waste due to obsolescence, damage, or being broken beyond repair.
- **The UK has a growing e-waste problem.** Technology is rapidly evolving causing devices to become quickly outdated. For example, for every one new mobile phone in the UK, there are four unused. As a result, e-waste has become the fastest growing solid waste stream on the planet. The UK produces an average of 23.4kg of e-waste per person making it the second biggest producer of e-waste per capita.
- **E-waste is dangerous when disposed of incorrectly.** E-waste can contain hazardous chemicals like lead and mercury which, if incorrectly disposed of through the general waste stream, can leach into and harm the natural environment. E-waste, and lithium-ion batteries in particular, also poses a fire risk, with over 1,200 battery fires breaking out in bin lorries and at waste sites in 2023 alone, a 71% increase from 2022.
- **Recycling and reusing more e-waste can save emissions.** Extracting raw materials and manufacturing new products is carbon intensive. Emissions can be avoided by reusing, repairing, and recycling old electronics. This reduces the need for new raw materials and manufacturing more of the same products.
- **Better management of e-waste will improve our resource security and efficiency.** Electronic devices often contain critical raw materials, such as mercury, cobalt and lithium. With only 22% of the world's e-waste being properly collected and recycled each year, production of these devices relies on virgin material extraction and stable supply chains to procure them. Extracting these finite resources can be extremely polluting to the natural environment and nearby communities. It's more efficient to

extend the lifespan of the materials already in our economy by reusing and recycling them than to continue extracting and then wasting them.

- **The rise of 'fast tech' is a new and growing environmental problem in the UK**. In the UK, we throw away five million disposable vapes a week and many of them end up as litter on our streets. More than 30 million disposable vapes are purchased per month in the UK, yet just 17% of users say they deposit them for recycling.

Previous government action

- **The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013 seek to reduce the amount of electronic waste incinerated or sent to landfill.** Through these regulations, the government sets annual targets for e-waste across 14 product categories, which includes small and large household appliances. There is a compliance fund that producers and distributors who do not meet these regulatory requirements pay into. In 2017-2018, this fund raised £10.6 million which enabled the funding of research, awareness campaigns, and recycling points across the UK.

- **Earlier this year, the previous government proposed a set of reforms to boost e-waste collection and recycling rates.** The consultation sought to reform the 2013 regulations to increase collection and recycling rates and make the producers and distributors of e-waste more responsible for the full life cycle of the products. However, the process ended when the election was called in May.

- **England has a legally-binding target to reduce residual waste by 50% by 2042.** Residual waste is the waste that is left once the recyclable waste has been separated. This target was set through the 2021 Environment Act. Because so much e-waste ends up in the residual waste stream, the government will need to be proactive with actions on e-waste to make sure it is removed from this waste stream and diverted towards recycling and, where appropriate, reuse.

- **Consumers now have the right to repair a limited set of consumer appliances.** Introduced in 2021, these regulations seek to extend the lifetime usage of specified appliances and electronics by up to 10 years by legally requiring manufacturers to make available spare parts for professional repairers of their products. These regulations currently only cover dishwashers, washing machines, washer-dryers, refrigeration appliances, televisions, and electronic displays.

- **A ban on disposable vapes was included in the ultimately unsuccessful Tobacco and Vapes Bill.** The intended ban from April 2025 was announced in January 2024. Labour has supported the disposable vapes ban so it may still be passed into law.

Labour's plans

- **The Environment Secretary has made waste one of his five priorities.** Complementing the Labour Party manifesto pledge to move towards a circular economy, the new Secretary of State, Steve Reed, has committed to creating a roadmap to move Britain to a zero-waste economy. A circular economy taskforce will be established to advise the government on this roadmap. While not targeting e-waste specifically, this roadmap will likely include measures on e-waste.

- **This Labour government is considering introducing a common charging cable policy.** Through a call for evidence, the government is seeking views on whether the UK should require all new electronic devices to use the same charging cable. This will reduce e-waste by making future cable recycling simpler and enabling consumers to avoid having to buy new chargers for each different device they own.

Ideas and resources
- **Apply for available funding pots to finance an e-waste project in your community.** Material Focus regularly makes grants available for local authority e-waste recycling and disposal projects in the UK. Other e-waste funding pots are available through Hubbub's Time after Time project. A full list of government grants is available here and a list of charitable grants is available here.
- **Embed waste reduction in your council's procurement strategy.** Buying second hand and refurbished electronic devices is often a cheaper option to buying brand new products and will help save functional equipment from being squandered. Meanwhile, investing in the repair and maintenance of existing devices avoids the need to replace equipment for as long as possible. Back Market is an example of a reputable refurbished tech and electrical goods supplier.
- **Celebrate International E-Waste Day.** Running an e-waste awareness campaign for your residents can help to draw attention to this issue and promote best practice. This campaign could inform residents of the benefits of recycling e-waste as well as showcase local second hand and repair businesses. Material Focus has lots of resources available for local authorities that register as a partner on their website, including their resources relating to their national HypnoCat campaign.
- **Run a physical awareness campaign.** Some ways to socialise e-waste disposal in your local community could include: distributing leaflets; including e-waste talks at upcoming events; leading talks within local schools; hosting repair events; or housing an e-waste display or collection point in your town hall. There may also be scope to run a campaign on a topical or specific e-waste issue such as disposable vapes.
- **List local e-waste disposal options and repair businesses on your council website.** By listing local e-waste collection points or a link to the Recycle Your Electricals recycling locator, repair businesses, and retailers that offer e-waste collection on your council's website, you are providing residents with a definitive and publicly accessible resource for correctly disposing of their e-waste.
- **Read the wealth of e-waste resources available online**. Organisations including Hubbub, Material Focus, Freecycle, Traid, Reuse Network, and SUEZ each have published many resources online that are tailored towards local authority e-waste reduction efforts and guidance for residents on correct e-waste disposal.
- **Help to provide those in need in your community with a mobile phone.** Through its Community Calling campaign, Hubbub partners with community groups and councils to collect disused mobile phones and redistribute them to those in need. This campaign targets the 1.5 million UK homes that do not have access to the internet.

- **Establish a reuse shop on a council-owned site or host a local charity shop there.** A reuse shop can help to connect residents wanting to offload unwanted electronic items with those looking to acquire second hand ones. SUEZ has created resources for local authorities wanting to offer a reuse service in their Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC). Your council can establish its own reuse shop or partner with a charity to provide the space to operate their own in your HWRC.
- **Establish an electrical goods borrowing service.** Electrical goods such as power tools are often used infrequently. By establishing or supporting a local borrowing service, you can provide residents with a convenient and affordable option for using electrical goods that prevents e-waste. The Library of Things scheme alone has already prevented 211 tonnes of e-waste ending up in landfill since 2014.
- **Run a free e-waste home collection for residents.** Making recycling e-waste as convenient as possible for residents by providing a free collection of e-waste enables them to rid their homes of e-waste and returns these materials to the economy, for recycling or reuse. Many councils partner with organisations such as Traid to deliver this service on their behalf.
- **Allocate e-waste collection sites at HWRCs and within the local community.** Collection banks can be located in HWRCs and at sites with high footfall, such as supermarkets, libraries, schools and churches, to make e-waste recycling more convenient for residents. These banks are also a more cost-efficient way for councils that are unable to provide a dedicated kerbside service to collect e-waste.
- **Host repair cafe events in council-owned spaces.** Repair cafes enable residents to get their products fixed or learn how to fix them for themselves. Partner organisations like The Restart Project who can offer this service. As well as space, repair cafes are often in need of seed funding to cover the cost of their insurance for these events, which your council may be able to support with.

Case studies
- **Thurrock Council has battery recycling boxes located in convenient locations across the community**. The council provided easily accessible and heavily frequented spots in the local community, such as supermarkets with battery disposal boxes. The council then empties the boxes and recycles and appropriately disposes of them.
- **Hampshire County Council created a guide for residents on how to deal with e-waste.** The guide informs residents: what e-waste is; the problem with e-waste; how to safely repair e-waste; how to rent, borrow or buy electronic equipment; how to donate or sell electricals for reuse; how to wipe personal data; and what to do when all else fails. This guide was published on the council website, and includes links to reuse platforms and other organisations for further information.
- **Warwickshire County Council has partnered with Age UK to host a reuse shop at their HWRC.** The charity sells a wide variety of donated items, including lots of electrical goods from tv's to garden tools. As well as decluttering people's homes whilst extending the life of household goods and avoiding waste disposal, this initiative also helps raise money for great causes.