

Fridge/freezer recycling capacity crisis – briefing note | ADEPT

Summary

The UK has an acute shortage of fridge and freezer recycling capacity. As a result, some Producer Compliance Schemes (PCS) have already had to suspend collections from local authority sites, and many Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC) have exhausted their safe permitted storage capacity. Local authorities across the country are turning residents away or will be doing so imminently. Without urgent intervention, the likely results are fridge stockpiles, widespread fly tipping, environmental harm and public anger.

Background

Old fridges and freezers are collected from the public at HWRCs, from the kerbside and as fly tipped items, then taken to Waste Transfer Stations. Under the producer responsibility-based WEEE Regulations, PCSs arrange their collection, transport and recycling in specialist treatment facilities, at no cost to local authorities. The UK has only a small number of these specialist facilities, and several are temporarily unavailable due to fires, breakdowns and closures. This has significantly reduced processing capacity, which is now creating problems across the UK. This has been exacerbated by the hot weather this year, as higher numbers of units are failing. Given the changing climate, these conditions are likely to become the norm. This is not a one-off issue; action is needed to prevent it recurring year on year.

Our concerns

1. **Producer responsibility is under strain:** Regulation 34 of the WEEE Regulations obliges a PCS to collect from local authority sites within five working days of a request. This safety net is under significant strain, with some collections suspended. Clarity is needed on PCS obligations during plant outages, including use of interim storage and contingency plans and who covers these costs. Some local authorities are being asked to find their own temporary storage sites, which is both difficult and costly. Producers should be covering the full costs of managing this waste stream; local authorities should not be expected to find and fund temporary storage sites.
2. **Regulatory barriers to temporary storage:** we welcome the Environment Agency's (EA) recognition of the developing situation and its proposed regulatory workarounds to allow for temporary fridge storage sites. The agency has listened to our concerns and has now put forward a proposal that could work, providing a pragmatic view is taken with regards to compliance with the conditions proposed.
3. **Insufficient long-term capacity:** the UK needs a stable marketplace to encourage investment in more specialist recycling facilities. This will ensure sufficient capacity is available, recognising that some plants will always be offline due to breakdowns and maintenance.

Our asks – how you can help

1. In the short term, secure funding via the producer compliance scheme to underwrite the additional costs that local authorities have incurred and will continue to incur, particularly with regards to temporary storage sites.
2. Engage with and support the EA to take a pragmatic view on the implementation of their revised regulatory position with regards to the conditions they are seeking to impose.
3. Commit to an urgent policy review of the WEEE Regulations to ensure true producer responsibility for the items producers place on the market covering the full cost of managing end of life WEEE.
4. Enable and support cross sector engagement to create the right conditions for investment in processing capacity in the UK, with effective policy support.

Our shared goal is for all local authorities to once again offer a disposal point to their householders for discarded fridges and freezers. ADEPT would welcome an early meeting to discuss this.

About ADEPT

ADEPT is the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT) - a membership organisation representing place directors and their teams from county, unitary and combined authorities across England. Our members manage vital local services, from highways, waste, recycling and planning. Collectively, our members provide vital services for more than 42 million people and handle around 75% of all recycled waste in England.