IT Equipment Recycling UK: Why Your Old Tech Doesn't Just Disappear

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> The UK generates 1.65 million tonnes of e-waste every year — and 12 million computers have ended up in landfill in the last 5 years alone. Here's why that matters, and exactly what you can do about it.

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Key Statistics at a Glance

Stat	Figure	Source
UK e-waste generated per year	**1.65 million tonnes**	UN Global E-Waste Monitor 2024
Computers & laptops sent to landfill (last 5 years)	**12 million devices**	Collect and Recycle
UK e-waste NOT properly recycled	**~55%**	WRAP UK
IT & telecoms waste annually	**~38,000 tonnes**	Uswitch / GOV.UK
E-waste generated per person per year	**24.5 kg**	UN Global E-Waste Monitor 2024

1. The Scale of the Problem

When you upgrade your phone or replace an old PC, what happens to the old one? For millions of people in the UK, the answer is: it ends up in a bin, a cupboard, or eventually a landfill.

The UK is one of the biggest producers of electronic waste in the entire world — generating around **24.5 kg of e-waste per person, per year**. That's roughly the weight of a large microwave, every single year, for every single person in the country.

IT equipment specifically — laptops, desktops, monitors, phones, tablets, printers, and routers — makes up a significant and growing chunk of that figure. IT and telecoms waste has **nearly doubled over the last 15 years**, rising from around 19,000 tonnes in 2008 to almost 38,000 tonnes annually today.

> **Around 12 million computers and laptops** have ended up in UK landfill in the past five years alone. That's millions of devices packed with metals, chemicals, and recoverable materials — buried in the ground instead of being reused or recycled.

2. What Happens When Electronics Go to Landfill?

Electronics aren't like food scraps or cardboard — they don't break down harmlessly. Inside your old laptop or phone are materials like **lead, mercury, and cadmium**. When these devices are buried in landfill, those toxic substances slowly leak into the surrounding soil and water over years and decades.

The damage isn't abstract. It affects farmland, rivers, drinking water, and wildlife. It's a slow-burning environmental crisis happening underneath our feet.

Environmental impacts of e-waste in landfill

- **Soil contamination** — heavy metals from circuit boards and batteries seep into the ground, making land toxic and unusable for agriculture
- **Water pollution** — chemicals leach into groundwater and rivers, threatening ecosystems and drinking water supplies
- **Air pollution** — in developing countries where much UK e-waste is illegally exported, devices are often burned to extract metals, releasing toxic fumes
- **Wildlife harm** — contaminated environments devastate local animal and plant populations
- **Lost resources** — valuable materials like gold, silver, and copper are buried forever instead of being recovered and reused

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> ⚠ **Did you know?** One tonne of old circuit boards contains up to **300 grams of gold** — that's 60 times more concentrated than gold ore mined from the earth. The UN estimates recoverable materials in global e-waste are worth approximately **$57 billion annually**. By throwing electronics away, we're literally burying treasure.

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3. The Data Security Risk

This one often gets overlooked. When you throw away an old device without properly wiping it, your data goes with it. ICO research shows the majority of discarded devices contain residual personal data — passwords, documents, photos, banking details, and login credentials.

Simply deleting files or doing a basic factory reset is often **not enough**. A professional IT recycling service will ensure your data is securely and completely destroyed before the device is processed — protecting you as well as the planet.

For businesses, this isn't just good practice — it's a legal requirement under **UK GDPR**. Improper disposal of devices containing customer or employee data can result in serious fines from the ICO.

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4. UK Recycling by the Numbers

Here's the uncomfortable truth: the amount of electronic equipment sold in the UK grew by **25% between 2018 and 2024**. But the amount being properly collected and recycled? It barely moved — rising by less than 1% in the same period.

> *"Only 45% of UK e-waste is formally recycled. More than half of all our discarded electronics are not handled properly."*

How the UK Compares Internationally

Country	E-Waste Per Capita	Formal Recycling Rate	Notes
Norway	26 kg/person	~44%	Take-back scheme in place
UK	**24.5 kg/person**	**~45%**	Improving, but gap remains
Switzerland	23.4 kg/person	>50%	Take-back scheme in place
Global Average	~7 kg/person	17.4%	Well below target

Sources: UN Global E-Waste Monitor 2024, WRAP UK, Uswitch

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5. How to Recycle Your IT Equipment

The good news? There are clear, accessible ways to dispose of your old tech responsibly. Here's exactly how:

Step 1 — Find your nearest WEEE drop-off point

Most local councils and many large retailers — Currys, John Lewis, Argos — accept old electrical items for free recycling. Use the official finder at recycleyourelectricals.org.uk to find your closest point.

Step 2 — For businesses: use a certified IT recycler

UK businesses are legally required to dispose of IT equipment through a licensed waste carrier under the WEEE Regulations 2013. A certified WEEE recycler will collect your equipment, issue a duty of care certificate, and handle secure data destruction.

Step 3 — Consider donating if the device still works

Working laptops and computers can be refurbished and donated to schools, charities, and community groups. Organisations like **Computer Aid** and **Donate a PC** give devices a meaningful second life.

Step 4 — Don't forget the smaller items

Phones, cables, earphones, routers, keyboards — these all count as e-waste too. Many mobile retailers offer phone take-back schemes, and most supermarkets now have small electricals recycling bins near the entrance.

Step 5 — Think before you buy

Choose brands that offer take-back schemes or use recycled materials. Extending the life of a device by even one extra year reduces its carbon footprint significantly — manufacturing new electronics is enormously energy-intensive.

6. Frequently Asked Questions

How much IT equipment ends up in landfill in the UK? Around 12 million computers and laptops have ended up in UK landfill over the past five years. The UK generates approximately 1.65 million tonnes of total e-waste every year, making it the second-largest e-waste producer per capita in Europe at around 24.5 kg per person annually.

Is it illegal to throw IT equipment in the bin in the UK? Yes — for businesses, it is a legal requirement under the WEEE Regulations 2013 to dispose of electrical and electronic equipment through a licensed waste carrier. For households, e-waste should be taken to designated WEEE collection points rather than placed in general bins or black bag waste.

Where can I recycle old IT equipment for free in the UK? You can recycle IT equipment free of charge at your local council household waste recycling centre, through large retailers like Currys or John Lewis, or via the drop-off finder at recycleyourelectricals.org.uk. Businesses should contact a certified WEEE recycler for collection.

What percentage of UK e-waste is actually recycled? Only around 45% of UK e-waste is formally recycled through proper channels. The remaining 55% ends up in landfill, is illegally exported, or is otherwise improperly disposed of. WRAP estimates the UK could realistically achieve 65–70% recycling with improved infrastructure and greater business compliance.

Is my data safe when I recycle my old computer? Not automatically. Simply deleting files or factory resetting a device is often not enough to permanently erase data. A certified IT recycler or WEEE specialist will carry out secure data destruction — either through certified software wiping or physical shredding of drives — and provide documentation confirming it has been done.

One Device. One Decision. Real Impact.

You don't need to be an environmental expert. You just need to make a different choice the next time you're done with a device.

Find a drop-off point near you → recycleyourelectricals.org.uk

SEO Metadata (for your CMS)

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Data sources: UN Global E-Waste Monitor 2024 · WRAP UK · Material Focus · GOV.UK WEEE Statistics · ICO Research 2024

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