

## *E-waste disposal in the UK – an insider's story*

*by Keith Baker*

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As part of my day job I get to spend a little time perusing websites such as those run by the UK's Knowledge Transfer Networks, and back in January I came across a request for help regarding e-waste from someone at Hampshire County Council. My response included a very clear warning about the dangers of cowboy recyclers and e-waste ending up in the developing world. I ought to state up front that my contact is not directly involved in recycling e-waste at the Council, but is in a department that has an interest and is interested on a personal level.

Anyway, two weeks later I was up late having a beer and a general news catch up when I read something that almost caused a very expensive beer-meets-computer accident. A team of investigators from Greenpeace, *The Independent* and *Sky News* had taken a scrap TV, damaged it beyond repair, slapped an RFID tag on it, and used the services of a council to dispose of it. No guesses as to which council it was disposed of in and where it ended up.

Now I could just use this as a reason to write another article about the dangers of e-waste being exported for "re-use" in the developing world and the UK's deplorable track record in failing to stop this, but not this time – enough is enough.

**The role of BJ Electronics:** First, let's go through what is known about how BJ Electronics, the Walthamstow-based company responsible for the export, ended up breaking the Basel Convention. The civic amenity site at which the TV was disposed of is run by contractors Hopkins Recycling for the Council, who sold it to BJ Electronics for re-use. According to BJ Electronics it was tested, although at the time the UK Environment Agency's testing procedure did not actually require that test to include plugging it in (it did, however, involve checking the plug). It was then deemed fit for export to Africa. Now in manager Joe Benson's response to Greenpeace he commented:

"We are checking everything that comes in here, we are not buying in waste. Anything that is broken, we are disposing of properly, we know what we are doing. We check machines and then we send them to Africa... Somebody down there doesn't like us, it's sabotage. We have a product test here and as long as the set is alright then everything is okay and the product test will pass it. This year the Environment Agency came round to say that they are happy with the product test... If you are dealing with a 1,000 TVs, then maybe one could possibly get through. In this industry you get 95% good, and you can still repair others."

As Mr. Benson is investigating the possibilities of legal action against those concerned, I'll leave you to make your own minds up about the likelihood of this simply being a coincidence, but, if he does take legal action, I'll happily appear for the defense. The likes of BJ Electronics are profiting from a trade in reuse, however legal, that must be made subject to much tighter regulation, and it seems that the UK EA still has some way to go on this.

So back to the real matter in hand – what can be said of Hampshire County Council? This may surprise a few regular readers (there must be some of you!) but I don't lay the blame with them. My contact is on public record as seeking advice on this issue before the story emerged, so they were clearly aware of a potential problem and taking steps to begin resolving it. But what options were open to them? The European Electronics Recyclers Association exists, but appears basically unheard of in the UK – I couldn't even find a link on the UK Environment Agency's website. Its own website is limited, not least by the number of companies registered.

Now I have no desire to knock the work of EERA as this is very much an uphill task and I did contact them to raise my concerns. I have been informed that a position paper focusing on a system of Registered and Approved Partners (RAPs) in EU member states will shortly be posted on their website. So at the time of writing I can't say for certain whether or not this will be implemented, but the use of the term "position paper" does not inspire me with confidence. Furthermore, their task is hampered by the problem that the WEEE Directive was implemented on a state-by-state basis, so information appropriate in one state may not be appropriate in another.

This brings us back to incompetence on behalf of the UK government, which trumpeted the benefits of its late implementation of the Directive but has so far failed to do much in the way of actual implementation. The job of managing the collection of e-waste is largely in the hands of local authorities and councils, who in the days of privatization invariably sub-contract it. Now not only has the government dragged its feet over this but it has also failed to provide councils with sufficient information about the impacts of exporting e-waste, and discourage or ban them from using companies like BJ Electronics. The fact that one council, at least, found so little that they took the initiative of seeking advice via a KTN shows just how well the government is doing.

Now in Hampshire the issue is being used as a political football, with a local MP and a few councilors turning on the council, which leads me to wonder which of them had raised the issue within their respective political parties before this story got out.

**The export debate:** Now before I conclude, let's briefly address the export issue. Some of you may remember that late last year I took the World Computer Exchange to task over its apparent lack of any real system to ensure that computers destined for the developing world were being exported as actually fit for re-use. Nor was I able to find anything in the way of robust evidence that the WCE was doing much in the way of developing e-waste recycling facilities (still no further reply by the way). Now there clearly are benefits to donating refurbished PCs and other IT equipment to some parts of the developing world, in particular those whose populations have little or no access to education. The Basel Convention does address this, but its length and scope make it an unwieldy weapon in the fight against e-waste dumping.

A standalone, UN-backed list could solve that problem through agreeing which nations would and would not benefit from a tightly-regulated stream of IT-aid. These could be determined by factors such as the above plus, for example, the level of development of any nascent IT industries that could be supported in providing low cost equipment – not too dissimilar to the way medical aid is determined. For example, India, despite not being quite up to the job yet (see last issue) is far closer to achieving this than, say, Uganda. Regulation, standards for, and assessment of exported devices would also need to be subject to international agreement and implementation at national and local levels, but the bones of the policies are there (e.g. the European Waste Shipment Regulation), and I would also want to see an additional standard for e-waste recyclers and their clients who wish to avoid the risks associated with exports entirely.

We then have the problem of developing environmentally and socially responsible e-waste recycling facilities in recipient nations. This will not be an easy problem to solve as the waste is already there and mounting in volume. It may be a matter of debate as to the conflicting priorities of addressing this and dealing with that ultimately created by the legitimate exports, but the latter could at least be mitigated by further limiting exports to those devices containing lower amounts of hazardous materials (e.g. a RoHS-compliance limit).

Yet change at a global level can be notoriously slow and the need is urgent. We know by now who the leaders in impact-reduction are, so it may speed the process to encourage them to take it again, and for all nations to tighten existing legislation or develop it according to global best practice.

**In conclusion:** Enough is enough. February saw the UK Environment Agency's first prosecution of an individual for an e-waste crime. A 46-year-old man from West Sussex is awaiting trial in May. The EA also claims it has prevented the shipment of 33 containers of e-waste destined for the developing world in the last six months, but this is a drop in the ocean compared to the 33,000 tons of computers that are illegally exported from the UK to Africa each year. It remains to be seen what will be in EERA's position paper, and please sign Computer Aid's petition that is calling for:

*"The Prime Minister to increase the resources given to the Environment Agency so they can stop the UK's electrical waste being dumped in developing countries:, but we need to do more, and we need to do it now.*

### **So I'm going to take this opportunity to ask you all for help!**

**A call for help:** First please read the article above and circulate it and this to everyone you know. I am issuing a call for a dedicated organization to work on providing advice, developing a registration scheme for responsible e-waste recyclers operating in the UK, and lobbying to end the practice of exporting waste equipment for "re-use" in the developing world (the commentary on exports excepted). I'm envisaging something along the lines of the Basel Action Network's e-Stewards program that is being piloted in the US this year, with the additional need to develop a UK/EU version of BAN to support it, but I'd value your input as to the precise details. Please get in touch if you are willing to help in any way with the following:

- If you, or anyone you know of, have any experience of the problems of responsibly disposing of e-waste in either the UK or the wider EU I'd really like to know about it.
- If you know of any newspapers, magazines, websites, etc., that would be interested in carrying a version of this article or could help publicize this call in any way.
- If you agree with the call I would welcome letters of support. The more of these I can get together the better the case will be.
- Finally, if you are willing to offer any help – practical, financial, or anything else you can think of to get this off the ground. There is a clear need for this and I've already had some interest\*, but I need the support, people and resources to kick-start it. As an initial target, it would be great to progress this to a level where we can issue a press release by the time Obama signs the Basel Convention.

You can contact me by e-mail at [taliesin@gmail.com](mailto:taliesin@gmail.com), by phone on +44 (0) 7884125540 or write to me at 20/4 Gorgie Road, Edinburgh, EH11 2LZ, UK. I've done my best to raise awareness of this problem via this column for almost the last four years now but it's time to do more, much more. Please help in whatever way you can.

**\*Watch this space, and in the meantime, check for updates from my good friends and fellow contributors at UK Displays and Lighting (<http://www.ukdl.net>).** And if you're in the UK or can get to it on Wednesday June 17, please think about attending UKDL's seminar on Energy, Waste Management and Recycling of Electrical Goods and Devices. The exact venue and speakers are currently TBC, but hopefully anyone who has previously attended a UKDL event will know how popular they are and how much hard work goes into organizing them. What comes out of it will depend on who attends. So if you're willing to support this call please come along!