



WASTE REDUCTION GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

Every year, businesses spend hundreds of pounds per employee on waste disposal. On top of these disposal costs, raw materials purchased and discarded represent wasted procurement spend. Employee time spent managing waste adds to operational overheads. And increasingly, customers, investors, and regulators are scrutinising how businesses handle their environmental footprint too.

The opportunity? Businesses that implement systematic waste reduction typically see disposal costs drop by 20-40% within the first year, while simultaneously improving operational efficiency and meeting growing sustainability expectations.

WHY WASTE REDUCTION MATTERS

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Global municipal solid waste generation is predicted to grow from 2.1 billion tonnes in 2023 to 3.8 billion tonnes by 2050. Landfills are overflowing, oceans are filling with plastic, and every tonne of waste sent to landfill generates methane emissions equivalent to driving a car over 1,000 miles. Businesses account for a significant portion of this waste, making reduction efforts essential for planetary health.

REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

Governments worldwide are tightening waste regulations.

- **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)** schemes are expanding across sectors, making manufacturers responsible for end-of-life disposal.
- The EU's **Circular Economy Action Plan** is driving waste reduction targets that will cascade through supply chains.
- In the UK, **Simpler Recycling legislation** now requires all English businesses with 10+ employees to separate specific recyclable materials (plastic, paper, card, glass, metal, and food waste) to standardise recycling across England and increase national recycling rates.
- For businesses planning for **Scope 3 emissions reporting**, waste represents a material impact that must be measured and managed.

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

Beyond disposal costs, waste represents failed investment in materials, packaging, and products. Resource prices continue to rise while disposal costs increase as landfill capacity shrinks. Companies that track waste carefully often discover they're purchasing more supplies than necessary. The financial logic is clear: prevention pays.



UNDERSTANDING YOUR BASELINE

Before implementing any changes, you need to know where you stand. Many businesses dramatically underestimate their waste generation because they've never measured it properly.

Start with a simple audit. For a typical two-week period, track what goes in your bins. If your waste collector provides data, request it. If not, use a handheld crane scale or a platform scale to weigh bags before disposal. Categorise waste into streams: general waste, recycling, organic/food waste, and specialist/hazardous waste (electronics, batteries, etc.).

Pay attention to patterns. Does waste spike on certain days? Are particular departments or processes generating disproportionate amounts? Is contamination preventing recyclables from being processed properly? These insights reveal where intervention will have the greatest impact.

THE WASTE HIERARCHY

The most effective waste strategy follows a clear hierarchy: **prevent** waste from being created, then **reuse** what can't be prevented, then **recycle**, then **recover** energy, and only as a last resort, dispose to landfill.

Every pound spent preventing waste eliminates future disposal costs and reduces procurement spend. The return on prevention far exceeds the return on better recycling.



Think of waste reduction through a **circular lens**. Rather than viewing materials as flowing linearly from purchase to disposal, consider how products, packaging, and resources can cycle back into use. This mindset shift opens up opportunities beyond traditional waste management.



REDUCTION STRATEGIES

OFFICE ENVIRONMENTS

- **Go digital where it makes sense** - Set printers to default double-sided. Remove personal desk printers, and switch to digital invoicing, contracts, and documentation workflows where clients and partners are receptive. However, remember the environmental impact of paper can be lower than the server energy required for extensive cloud storage of documents no one will read. So be strategic, not dogmatic.
- **Encourage reusables** - Disposable cups, plastic water bottles, and polystyrene takeaway boxes create waste for minimal convenience. Provide/encourage reusable alternatives (reusable water bottles, mugs, plates, and cutlery!) and make them the default.
- **Rethink office supplies** - Reduce regular purchases wherever possible and buy in bulk. Switch from disposables (like paper towels) to reusables (cloth towels) where practical, and avoid cleaning products that contain microplastics. Buy quality items that last rather than cheap items you'll replace frequently.
- **Challenge your suppliers** - When deliveries arrive wrapped in excessive packaging like plastic wrap around cardboard boxes, oversized boxes, or polystyrene foam, don't accept it as inevitable. Contact suppliers and ask about minimal packaging options. Many will accommodate once they know it matters to customers.
- **Client hospitality & gifts** - Corporate gift-giving often generates waste through throwaway promotional items and excessive packaging. Shift toward consumables (quality food or drink), experiences (tickets, memberships), or donations to charities clients care about. When physical gifts are appropriate, ensure they're useful, quality items that won't end up in drawers or bins.

RETAIL & HOSPITALITY

- **Product packaging** - If you sell products, your packaging carries your brand into customers' homes, and eventually, into their bins. Use this touchpoint to demonstrate sustainability credentials. Right-sized packaging reduces materials and shipping costs while lowering environmental impact. Recyclable or compostable materials show you've considered end-of-life. Clear disposal instructions help customers do the right thing. For retailers selling other companies' products, use your purchasing power. Tell suppliers you prioritise products with minimal, sustainable packaging. Some will listen. Over time, market pressure drives change.



- **Food waste management** - Food waste deserves special attention (see for our *Food Waste Reduction Guide* for more detailed guidance), but key principles include: accurate demand forecasting to prevent overproduction, proper stock rotation, appropriate storage to maximize shelf life, and composting or donation programmes for surplus food.
- **Customer waste separation** - Public-facing waste bins are notoriously contaminated because people don't read signs or don't care. Improve success rates by making the right choice obvious: use clear visual signage showing exactly what goes where, position bins strategically near where waste is generated, and ensure bin openings match contents (small slots for bottles, large openings for general waste). Accept that you'll never achieve perfect separation, but even improving from 60% to 75% accuracy makes a material difference.

MANUFACTURING & PRODUCTION

- **Process optimisation** - Waste in manufacturing often signals production problems. Offcuts and scraps may indicate poor cutting optimisation. Defective products point to quality control issues. Excess inventory becomes obsolete waste. Map where waste occurs in your processes, then ask why. Sometimes simple adjustments, like reconfiguring cutting patterns, improving equipment calibration, refining quality checks, dramatically reduce waste while improving output.
- **Material recovery** - One company's waste is often another's raw material. Industrial symbiosis networks connect businesses to swap waste streams. Metal shavings can be melted down. Fabric offcuts become insulation or padding. Organic waste becomes compost or animal feed. Before sending materials to disposal, research potential secondary uses or buyers.

BE SMART WITH E-WASTE

E-waste (laptops, monitors, phones, keyboards, and other IT equipment) is the fastest growing global waste stream. Electronics may often only represent a small proportion of a businesses' waste by weight, but are an outsized environmental and security concern. Laptops, phones etc. contain valuable materials like gold, silver, and rare earth elements alongside toxic substances including lead and mercury.

- Many manufacturers and retailers operate take-back schemes for their products at end-of-life.
- Establish a clear e-waste policy that specifies how equipment should be decommissioned, what gets refurbished versus recycled, and importantly who handles data security.
- See our separate *E-Waste End-Of-Life Guide* for further details.



SEPARATION & RECYCLING

Prevention comes first, but waste that can't be eliminated should be reused or recycled rather than sent to landfill. However, **recycling only works when done properly**.

Contamination - Recycling facilities can reject entire lorry loads of waste sent for recycling when contamination exceeds acceptable levels. Common contaminants include food residue/oils on packaging, incorrect materials in recycling bins, and "wish-cycling" (putting items in recycling hoping they're recyclable when they're not).

Make separation easy - Invest in clear signage with visual examples, not just text. Position bins strategically, and use consistent colour coding and labeling across all locations.

Recycling capabilities vary dramatically by location - Contact your waste collection provider to understand exactly *what* they accept, *how* materials should be prepared (clean, dry, separated), and *where* everything goes. If they can't provide this information, that's a potential red flag about whether they're actually recycling materials or simply sending everything to landfill.

Harder to recycle items - Many items that seem unrecyclable have specialised programmes:

- Batteries and electronics: retailer take-back schemes or municipal collection
- Printer cartridges and toner: manufacturer return programmes
- Coffee capsules: brand-specific recycling schemes
- Pens: TerraCycle and similar programmes
- Expanded polystyrene: specialised recyclers in some areas

Research options in your region and make these programmes accessible to employees.

Composting organic waste - Food scraps, coffee grounds, and plant-based materials can be composted rather than sent to landfill. This matters because organic waste in landfill generates methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Options include:

- On-site composting bins or wormeries (requires space and management)
- Commercial composting collection (increasingly available in urban areas)
- Food waste collection by your regular waste provider (check if available)

Even small-scale composting diverts meaningful weight from landfill while creating useful soil amendment.



EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Waste reduction will fail without employee buy-in. You can install perfect bins and write comprehensive policies, but if people don't understand *why* it matters or *how* to participate, nothing changes.

COMMUNICATE THE "WHY"

People respond to different motivations. Some care deeply about environmental impact. Others respond to cost savings or efficiency improvements. Many simply want to feel they're part of something positive. Communicate the business case alongside the environmental case:

"Our waste costs £X annually, and we believe we can cut that by 30% while improving our environmental performance."

MAKE TRAINING PRACTICAL

Waste reduction training shouldn't be a one-hour lecture. Integrate it into onboarding and regular operations:

- Show new employees how waste systems work during their induction
- Include waste reduction in department meetings when discussing efficiency
- Share progress updates and wins regularly
- Address confusion or mistakes constructively rather than punitively

CREATE OWNERSHIP

Form a Green Team or Sustainability Committee with representatives from different departments. Give them ownership of waste reduction initiatives, from research to implementation to tracking progress. Cross-functional teams bring diverse perspectives and create advocates across the organisation who champion changes within their areas.

GAMIFICATION AND COMPETITION

If you operate multiple sites or floors, track which location reduces the most waste or achieves the highest recycling rate. Publish results publicly. Small incentives - recognition, minor prizes - drive surprisingly high levels of engagement. Make it fun rather than preachy!



NEED MORE HELP?

Some waste challenges benefit from external expertise. We offer tailored consultancy support for businesses at any stage of their waste reduction journey:

- Waste audits and baseline assessments
- Custom waste reduction strategy development
- Supply chain engagement and procurement policy design
- Employee training and change management
- Tracking systems and progress measurement
- Integration with broader ESG and sustainability programmes

You can contact the team at: info@future-plus.co.uk

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Globally Relevant:

- [WRAP](#) (Waste and Resources Action Programme): Tools, case studies, and sector-specific guidance
- [Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#): Circular economy frameworks and case studies
- [UN Environment Programme](#): Global Waste Management Outlook

UK-Specific:

- [Simpler Recycling](#): UK GOV policy updates
- [DEFRA Conversion Factors](#): UK government data on emissions from waste disposal
- [Extended Producer Responsibility \(EPR\)](#): UK GOV policy updates

