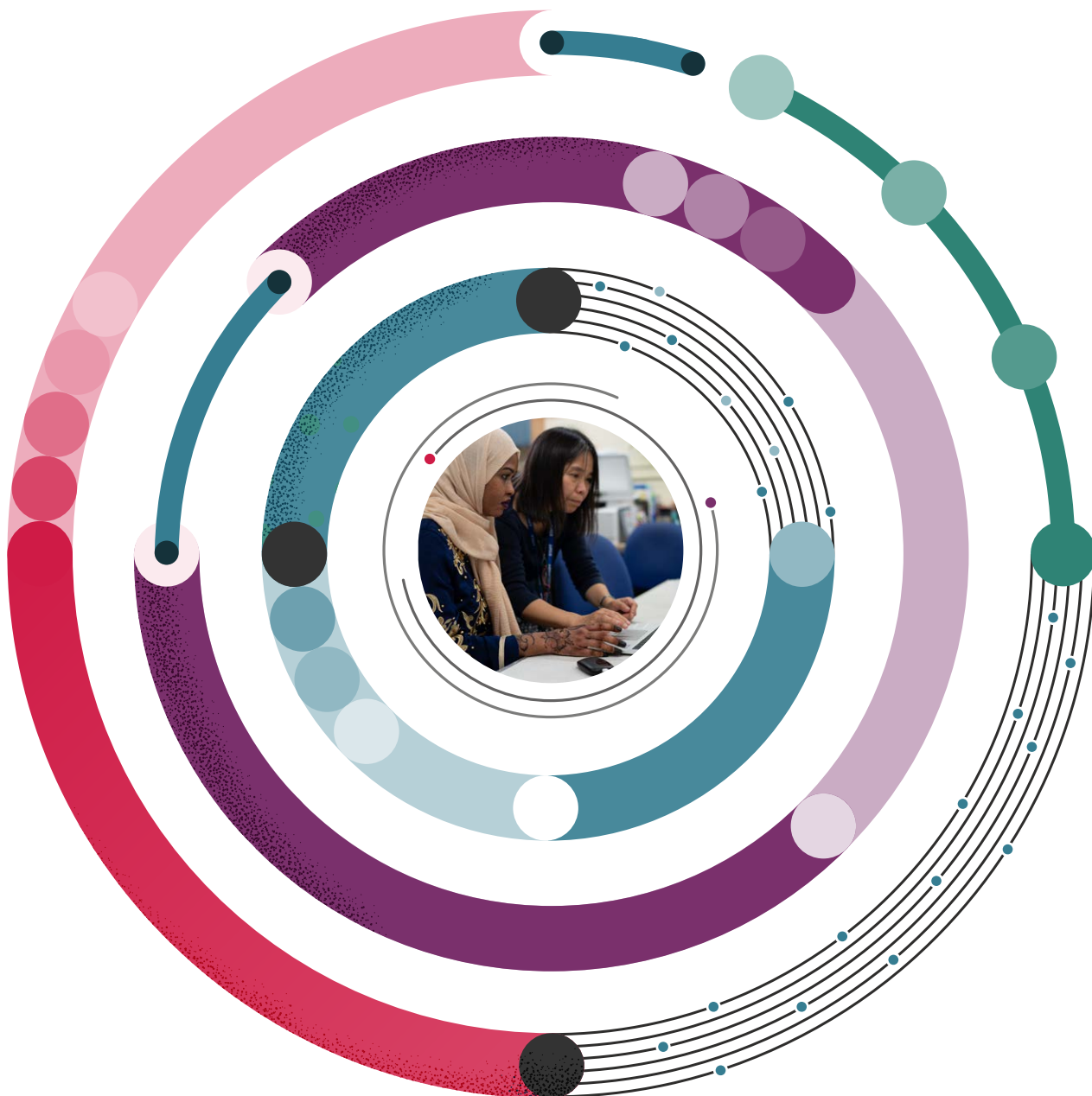


Public sector pioneers:

Reusing IT equipment to
bridge the digital divide

2023



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Disclaimer: This publication has been written in general terms. You should seek professional advice before acting or refraining from action on the suggestions and recommendations included in this report.

Foreword by Helen Milner, OBE

Public sector organisations are interested in reusing IT equipment to bridge the digital divide and reduce e-waste. Some are already doing it.

Public sector providers - in health, education, government - are increasingly worried about digital exclusion and deepening inequalities among the populations they serve. For some, this includes digital exclusion in their workforce. Concerns are intensifying in the cost-of-living crisis and a time of rapid digital transformation of public services, where efficiencies rely on people using online services regularly and confidently.

Public sector providers are also stepping up to the challenge of climate change, working out their pathways to reducing landfill, achieving net zero targets, and promoting a more regenerative, circular economy.

These two drivers - social and environmental - are now being brought together by pioneers in the public, voluntary, and commercial sectors, intent on finding ways to deliver social good at the same time as achieving greater circularity.

Reusing IT equipment to tackle digital exclusion is a powerful example of innovation which delivers social and environmental benefits.

Our research with public sector leaders across the UK indicates this is an innovation which is fast gaining traction.

This report shares findings from nearly thirty interviews with leaders across the UK from local authorities, devolved and central government, NHS Foundation Trusts, universities, colleges and civil society organisations. It complements recent research with the Circular Electronics Partnership and Deloitte which developed a model for 'circular electronics for social good'¹. The overarching model holds, with similar enablers and barriers, and it is exciting to see public sector leaders innovating and adapting in ways that are better for the planet while helping to close what is a widening and deepening digital divide in society.

This research shows that the question for public sector leaders is not 'why' but 'how'.



Helen Milner OBE is the Group Chief Executive of Good Things Foundation

Our findings

Interviews with nearly 30 public sector leaders revealed growing interest in device donation and reuse to help fix the digital divide.

Growing public sector interest

There is growing public sector interest in device donation schemes which prioritise reuse over recycling, so refurbished devices can reduce digital exclusion.

Differing pathways

While the overarching model is the same, the pathways differ. Public sector bodies varied in how involved they want to be in each stage of the end-to-end process.

Defining motivations

Motivations behind decisions to donate devices reflected:

- Awareness that lack of access to devices is a barrier for people (patients, students, local residents), especially in the context of digitalised provision
- Strategy commitments to tackling digital exclusion and wider inequalities, and/or to environmental sustainability and net zero targets.

Factors enabling device donation and reuse

Other enablers behind public sector decisions to donate devices were:

Culture - especially around risk management

Collaboration with charities, public sector peers, and within organisations

Champions who were committed to finding a way to make it happen

CEOs/CDOs whose support helped get decisions over the line

Catalysts - an office move, refresh of IT equipment, Covid-19 lockdowns

Additional considerations

Public sector pioneers overcame similar barriers to those identified by private sector business leaders; they also faced some additional considerations:

Asset ownership - where IT assets were purchased with public monies

Bureaucracy - pushing through to make device donation 'business as usual'

Costs and capacity at each stage of the end-to-end process, and decisions about what to do in-house and what to outsource to reputable partners

Data security - deciding which approach is most appropriate, while always ensuring compliance with policy, legal and regulatory requirements

Equity - making decisions about who should receive devices, and what wraparound support should be provided.

Our recommendations

There is more that policy makers and public sector organisations can do to enable reuse of IT equipment and device donation for social good.

The Department of Science, Innovation and Technology has committed to identify a roadmap to future donation of DSIT devices, and to encourage others to do the same.² This followed a House of Lords committee recommendation.³ Already, more public sector organisations are donating devices for social good, using a mix of pathways and partners. Their leadership should be commended. However, demand for devices from the National Device Bank is five times greater than supply, while 68% of digital inclusion hubs say lack of devices holds back their work.⁴ Given this, we recommend:

- Government at all levels and across the UK should lead by example, and encourage the reuse of publicly funded ICT equipment to help close the digital divide.
- Public sector bodies should build device donation for social good into their approaches:
 - Use device donation to meet sustainability KPIs with added social benefit
 - Identify the donation/reuse pathway which best suits their organisation (the insights brought together in this report are a good starting point)
 - Use opportunities like office moves or IT asset refreshes to donate devices
 - If current contracts don't permit, plan ahead to build in device donation
 - Showcase device donation impacts in annual sustainability reporting.⁵
- Contracting authorities - across education, health, government - should encourage device donation for social good in their procurement of IT products and services. The new Crown Commercial Services Technology Products & Associated Services framework is timely.
- Defra should update 'Greening Government: ICT and Digital Services Strategy 2020-2025' to provide a framework for device donation for social good.⁶
- HMG Sustainable Technology Advice and Reporting (STAR) team should share examples of public sector bodies which have built device donation into IT procurement and disposal.
- Representative bodies and networks serving local authorities, universities, colleges, and NHS providers should invite sector pioneers to share their practice and inspire others.

Setting the scene

Two important goals - reducing e-waste and closing the digital divide - have largely been pursued separately. This is changing.

As more services and opportunities move online, those who face digital exclusion find themselves locked out. The divide between the digital haves and have-nots is deepening, and widening as affordability of devices, and data, becomes a barrier to inclusion for more people.⁷



1 in 14 households
in the UK have no home internet access.*



2.5m households
struggle to afford fixed broadband.*



27% of adults on low incomes
only access the internet by smartphone.*



68% of community hubs
say they need more devices for digitally excluded people.*

Digital access means having the essentials to connect to the internet: a suitable device, and sufficient data connectivity. Digital inclusion is more than access; it is about having the digital skills, motivation, and understanding to use the internet safely and confidently. Research in progress to develop a holistic, household benchmark - a Minimum Digital Living Standard⁸ - brings all these elements together. Having a suitable device is not sufficient for inclusion, but it is essential.

* See Digital Nation 2023 for sources.

Concern is also growing about how much our consumption of devices, connectivity and digital technology is costing the planet.

- Electronic waste is identified as arguably the fastest growing waste stream on the planet, while estimates put the global carbon footprint of ICT as greater than the aviation industry.⁹
- Devices and other IT equipment rank high among the 200,000 tonnes of business electrical waste thrown away each year in the UK alone.¹⁰
- The search for less extractive and more regenerative approaches have inspired global initiatives like the Circular Electronics Partnership.¹¹

Public sector pioneers have begun to bring these two important agendas together: environmental and social - both reducing e-waste and closing the digital divide.

This report explores the motivations, enablers, barriers and additional considerations which public sector organisations face in determining whether to adopt a more circular approach in how they manage their IT estate, and how this can help them to play their part in improving the lives of digitally excluded people.

'It's the right thing to do'

Awareness of digital exclusion, commitment to sustainability targets, and a desire to give back to communities - all motivated reuse and donation.

Meeting multiple targets

Environmental, social, and digital inequalities are intertwined. Public sector pioneers were motivated and able to make strategic connections across all of these through device reuse.

Champions were passionate about reducing landfill and e-waste, saying that prioritising a 'second life' for devices over landfill, even recycling, was a 'no-brainer'.

Many described how device reuse schemes hit multiple targets at once - from equality to environmental - and were a way to give back to communities; delivering a 'double whammy'.

Sustainability KPIs, such as net zero targets, were a powerful lever in making the case.

"Our preference is always to give back... we do other community stuff. Rather than it going to a landfill or be resold, we would much rather, you know, go down that route"

"We can't just dump them in landfill. And see, we're adding some value for our residents and they're being utilised and given a second life. So it's the right thing to do really."

'It's the right thing to do'

As digital transformation of public and health services continues, many public sector leaders are reflecting on the risks for equalities and outcomes for service users and residents. Device donation can be a way to mitigate these risks.

"When you say you have a digital strategy, it must include digital inclusion in that strategy... for me, that is part of the thinking... how I would like the education sector to approach solving this problem"

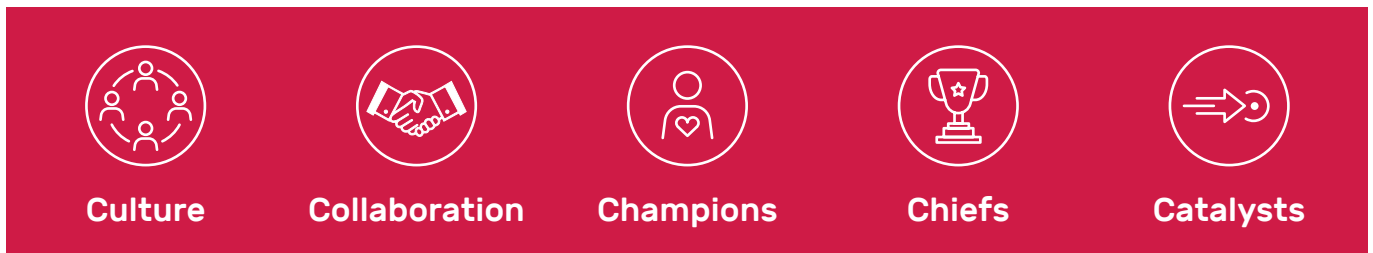
Employee engagement

A few spoke about benefits for employee engagement, especially in IT/digital and estate management teams. Involvement in device donation created a direct link to social good. This was evident whether organisations worked with partners or ran schemes in-house.

"It's the right thing to do... If digital services are going online, what is the responsibility of the NHS to be part of something bigger that is addressing digital exclusion and ensuring people have got a device to be able to do that?"

Enablers: Motivation into action

Data security risks are a barrier but it is organisational culture (more than legal or regulatory frameworks) that determines whether this is overcome.



Culture - managing risks

Data security is a major concern for all organisations in the public sector. Everyone we spoke with recognised the importance of full compliance with policy, legal and regulatory requirements - for data security and protection, and disposal of electronic waste. So where there were differences, this largely reflected organisational culture.

"The people we've spoken to completely get the risks, and they think this is not insurmountable; there is a way through this"

"It's a shame because... we would have had this show on the road a long time ago but we're very particular about covering ourselves, especially around data"

The main concerns were: secure wiping of data; residual possibility of data breaches and implications such as penalties, negative press, and reputational damage. Even with certified assurance, some still had concerns: 'someone super clever could still try and reclaim stuff'.

One leader identified the risk culture in the organisation as the reason for an in-house approach, despite it being less efficient:

"I would have accepted at one point giving them all to an accredited outsourced provider that does good across the country... because of this local control and process and risk aversion [they] find it less risky to do the process themselves."

Where organisations were able to manage risks, common features were:

- Partnering with reputable organisations with fully certified processes and assurances. Sometimes, this involved first using an existing supplier to wipe data (data has to be wiped before recycling or disposal), then redirecting devices for reuse.
- In-house data wiping (sometimes destroying drives) before passing devices to a reputable partner. Some schemes (e.g. National Device Bank) then do extra checks.
- Up-to-date understanding in the organisation about technology, processes, and informed confidence in the level of security that can be provided now.



Collaboration

Successful approaches relied on identifying decision makers, internal buy-in, permissions and due diligence, cross-department communication and collaboration. This could include IT, procurement, asset or estate management, ESG, legal and financial teams. Digital inclusion leads could find it difficult to find the key decision makers. Once collaboration was in place, momentum started to build, especially when senior leaders got on board.

In one local authority, collaboration between the IT team and Adult Skills team in the pandemic led to a changed approach to IT asset disposal which is still going strong.

"We've had refugees come in and people are looking for work or wanting to do training... They were setting up this digital library to be able to provide these people with some IT equipment... We came to agreement with them that we would remove all traces of [council data]... so we have an asset sticker and we have all the data, we wipe them and then we drop them off at their office, and they put the software on there too, and we hand them out again."

Collaboration with charities or firms was common in most pathways. It was vital to do due diligence and choose partners with the required knowledge, processes, and accreditations in place, given the importance of managing risks at each stage. Partnerships included:

- National schemes like the National Device Bank, with a free, secure end-to-end process for any IT equipment to be donated (not only laptops or phones) and then distributed for free to community organisations helping digitally excluded people; similarly, local schemes like Hope Foundation/Furbit in Tees Valley.
- National schemes like ComputerAid which refurbish donated devices for resale, where their main social purpose is to upskill disadvantaged adults; similarly, local schemes like the Edinburgh Remakery.
- Arrangements between some local authorities and a local firm, where refurbished donated devices are sold at agreed prices, including a low cost option for people on low incomes. Some local authorities negotiated a proportion to distribute for free.

"The challenge was understanding that red tape, understanding if we could pitch it in a slightly different way to actually give that social value and donate the equipment to an organisation that could then rebuild them and distribute them."

"We made sure that they [external partner] had the correct certificates. Our IT team were really happy with the way they run their data wiping and they were happy to sign that off in terms of they've got confidence in it."



Champions

Public sector champions were personally and professionally motivated to make a positive contribution and reduce inequalities. For example, awareness of health inequalities and digital barriers for NHS patients motivated one director to act and develop an in-house scheme to give devices to their service users.

Champions were in a mix of positions and teams (e.g. digital inclusion or sustainability leads; IT and/or wider asset management; commissioning services). Success required skills in making the case, collaboration, working through logistics, navigating bureaucracy, and showcasing benefits. Where things couldn't get started, it was sometimes because they didn't know who to go to in their organisation.



Chiefs

Getting decisions over the line was easier, and quicker, with a champion in a senior role. This could be a Chief Executive, Chief Digital Officer, or Council Leader. They could drive this forward, speed up decision making and cut through sometimes unwieldy bureaucracy.

"Our CEO has been giving updates on where we're at... She is very, very, very keen... if there is any barriers to flag them with her"



Catalysts

COVID-19 was a catalyst for some. The shift to remote working raised awareness of IT assets and disposal, as well as digital inequalities, with some donating laptops to schools, students and charities.

Office moves or refurbishment, and wholesale refreshes of IT equipment, have been recent catalysts. Device donation presents a potential solution to the headache of out-of-date, unwanted equipment in cupboards or storerooms.

Importantly, regional initiatives appeared powerful catalysts, including in Greater London, Greater Manchester, West Midlands, Liverpool City Region, Wales. Initiatives like Get Online London can bring visibility, strengthen the business case, and support with due diligence.

"LOTI, the London Councils group, identified the charity we ended up using [Good Things Foundation] as they they've done all the due diligence. It was much easier to contract with them to give them the devices and ensure that those devices are actually being reused for people who need them"

Case studies

Liz's story

Liz didn't know how to use a computer.

"Every time I had to sit at a computer, I would be sweating buckets. I would forget my password, I didn't know what to log in to."

At Christmas, Liz had a full hip replacement. After surgery, she had an online form to fill out. Unable to do it on her outdated phone, she visited the library, which is where she found ClearCommunityWeb. They supported Liz to fill in the form and talked through other support. Liz was hesitant - she didn't have, and couldn't afford, a suitable device. Through the National Device Bank, Liz got a refurbished device (paired with free mobile data). Liz has since used her device to contact her council, manage appointments, join online meetings, and check out local events aimed at women of a similar age and ethnicity.

"It's been a lifeline for me. It's built my confidence."

Preema's story

Seetec, a community hub, supported Preema to get a refurbished device (paired with free mobile data) through the National Device Bank.

"I used to always ask my son for his laptop whenever I wanted to do anything online. This restricted the access I had to a digital device and also, I didn't feel as confident when using a laptop. Now I have my own, I have been able to practise and get used to using a device. I've been living in the UK for the last 20 years. I came here with 3 children after the death of my husband to make a new life... Now I feel I need to invest in my own skills and development. I have enrolled in the Seetec ESOL class to better my English language skills and having this laptop is helping me to further develop my digital and online skills."

Considerations for public sector organisations

Public sector organisations face considerations reflecting public duties.



Asset ownership and contracts

Where IT assets are bought with public monies, a first consideration is how this affects disposal. Some decision makers were satisfied that secure disposal could include donation for reuse. One organisation sought approval from Crown Commercial Services. The new Crown Commercial Services framework for Technology Products and Associated Services enables contracting authorities to build circularity into procurement.

Current contracts for IT services may be a barrier. Any changes must be considered for quality assurance and value. A contract nearing an end is a natural point in procurement cycles to reconsider current practices. Some successfully negotiated a contract change with an existing supplier to enable donation (using their supplier for wiping and refurbishment).

Some felt device donation to tackle digital exclusion was a more appropriate use of end-of-life public assets than commercial disposal. Doing the right thing outweighed the loss of rebates (a small percentage of profits from reselling or recycling IT assets).

"We don't want to be giving them for free for somebody else to be profiting off, but at present that is what is happening"



Bureaucracy

Public sector organisations sometimes faced considerable upfront work in moving through bureaucracy, despite a clear case on benefits. Organisations can be large and unwieldy, making it difficult to implement new approaches and processes. Where organisations had taken the first step and seen the benefits (stories of the difference in people's lives, carbon emissions reduced), it was easier to build on this. Indeed, building device donation into IT asset refresh cycles was already 'business as usual' in some public sector organisations.

"There's the lens of government having assets and doing something that is appropriate... that can stand scrutiny by the public... the press and media."

"I think it is just making it easy; making this part of how you do business..."



Costs and capacity

Finding a no-cost or low-cost solution to IT asset disposal was a priority given public funding pressures. At each stage, decisions were needed about how costs would be covered, and whose responsibility it was to cover them. Organisations may need to decide if the social value outweighs the cash value of rebates (small percentages of profit from commercial resale of disposed assets). This was harder where a rebate was earmarked for new IT. Some felt 'breaking even' was enough. Several felt that doing the right thing (and the optics) more than outweighed the rebate.

Preparing for donation

Decisions were shaped by IT asset management approaches such as IT refresh cycles, whether there was a centralised and up-to-date register, processes for collecting devices from staff, and the extent of internal reuse. Devices used for six to eight years were less likely to be suitable for reuse.

Some local authority in-house schemes refurbished council devices and also took donations from businesses, and in one case from the public. One scheme was waiting for the council to agree refurbishment of its own devices. Digital inclusion leads commented that additional resources were needed to scout for donations from businesses and/or to handle larger donations quickly.

Preparing for refurbishment

Decisions about data wiping costs reflected existing processes. Other costs were: secure transportation, storage, buying and installing new drives or operating systems, repackaging, data connectivity and warranties - to ensure quality refurbished devices for digitally excluded people.

Some in-house schemes require local charities to take responsibility for buying and installing operating systems and repackaging. Charities might receive support to cover these costs from social value clauses or charitable grants. Where device donation was outsourced to a reputable partner, costs were covered through selling refurbished devices or recycled components.

Preparing for distribution

Decisions and costs reflected how involved the organisation wanted to be in deciding who receives devices, and what support and after-care is offered. The level of wraparound support and after care, as well as the quality of the refurbished device and up-to-date operating systems, is especially important for digitally excluded people with low digital confidence.

"If we can find a way to do this for free, that's what we want to do - because we don't want to find money for a project like this."



Data security and technology

Ensuring data security and wiping data to the required high standards was a key consideration for all. Organisations made different decisions about how to do this.

"we made sure that they [external partner] had the correct certificates... our IT team were really happy with the way they run their data wiping... happy to sign that off"

"drives and memory are destroyed using our [in-house] route... we need to have an additional degree of confidence that data has been wiped"

Factors shaping decisions were:

- Processes and contracts already in place for disposal or recycling. Some renegotiated contracts so devices could be redirected to device reuse schemes.
- Level of sensitivity of data. Some identified which IT equipment could, and couldn't, be donated; this was also shaped by contracts governing purchase and disposal.
- Quality, age and technology. This affected what was involved in secure data wiping. Some local authorities felt their devices were too 'hammered' to be refurbished.

"we used to take out the hard drives and put a spike through them... there's none of that anymore. The vendor supplies the tools to do the wiping and as a result I'm more comfortable that that's a secure process"

All decisions reflected careful considerations about data security, risks, and responsibilities.



Equity

The final stage of the end-to-end process raised very important questions for public sector bodies about their role in deciding who receives a refurbished device, and their expectations around the quality of devices, and wraparound support.

Collaborating with a reputable partner, like the National Device Bank, was felt to offer a trusted way to distribute devices to people who need them (with warranties and support). Some organisations valued this as a useful buffer from political, public or media criticism, to avoid being seen to prioritise recipients in one ward or constituency, for example.

Some universities and colleges (irrespective of device donation) were developing schemes for disadvantaged students to get laptops.

One national public body was weighing up whether end-of-business-life devices should first be offered to staff (especially staff on lower grades) as an employee benefit, before donating devices to external organisations.

"If there could be somebody in the middle that could reenable machines and put licences on them for people who don't necessarily have the technical skills or the time... That's the bit where we fall down cause we're giving somebody a car without wheels"

Case study

4Mnet's Story

4Mnet is a digital inclusion hub running a programme led by black migrant women who face prejudice, poverty, societal and self-stigma, mental health issues, and partner violence. Not being able to afford a device and connectivity is a big issue, and makes life harder and more isolating. Support from the National Device Bank has:

"enabled us as an organisation with no core funding, by enhancing our capacity to address digital access and improve quality of life for women and their families. 25 women have received tablets and data. Most are young mothers with young children and migrants living in temporary shared accommodation. Supporting them with data and devices has improved their quality of life, as they are now able to study and join our Zoom webinars, help their children with homework, undertake safeguarding training and ongoing online activities."

Sector perspectives



A Local Authority Perspective

Some local authorities chose to take part in a wider initiative, like Get Online London - where LOTI (London Office for Technology and Innovation) provides added assurance for both public and private sector donors to the London Device Bank (this is part of the National Device Bank run by Good Things Foundation).

A few local authorities have their own scheme. In-house schemes were more likely to be sustained and successful where: (a) internal collaboration had built up over time, often since the pandemic; (b) collaboration included dedicated in-house IT/digital resource; (c) the local authority wiped and donated its own IT equipment into its device bank; (d) effective collaboration was in place with local charities and libraries. In the absence of these, local authority leads sometimes struggled to secure donations and/or to handle larger donations. In-house schemes varied in which stages they did and which costs they covered. Some asked local charities to cover the costs of new operating systems and repackaging - which local charities did through bidding for grants and, in one case, a Social Value commitment.



A National and Regional Government Perspective

One public body has been wiping, refurbishing and donating devices to schools and charities since the pandemic. The benefits have been such that in-house resource is now dedicated to this. Here, different pathways are used for different IT equipment. Smartphones are leased rather than purchased, whereas laptops and tablets are first refurbished for internal use, then - when they have reached the end of their business life - they are securely wiped before being donated.

Two public bodies (one national, one regional) were preparing to join the National Device Bank. Tackling digital exclusion was the initial catalyst. The National Device Bank was felt to be a good solution as: no additional costs are incurred by the public body; refurbished devices come with free mobile data, a 12 month warranty, operating system and access to support for digitally excluded people; there is also an established process in place through which community groups and organisations can apply for devices.



A Higher Education Perspective

Alongside internal reuse of devices (by staff and students), there are strong opportunities to build donation of IT equipment into IT asset management - helping universities and colleges to meet their sustainability KPIs, give back to communities, and promote a circular economy.

Universities are large institutions. IT assets may belong to a faculty, department or project rather than the institution's estate. E-waste recycling may sit in Estates not IT teams. Internal reuse can be strong, with devices passed down to junior staff as IT gets older. Donating IT equipment for social good may be initiated through personal contact between a faculty and school, for example. One university is trialling a scheme to loan students a device for the duration of their course, with an option to buy at the end. Another university has created a Circular Economy Manager post and is interested in future device donation. One further education college is partnering with a local refurbishment partner and creating work experience opportunities for T-level students.



An NHS perspective

Many NHS institutions are big employers with large IT estates. There are strict information governance policies and procedures in place, reflecting the sensitivity of health and care personal data. Regular IT asset refresh cycles may be more established (than in some other public sector bodies) to comply with mandated information and cyber security standards. This may mean that rebates from disposing of IT assets are ringfenced.

One NHS leader described the robust processes already used to securely wipe all laptops prior to disposal. Destroying hard drives will soon not be necessary to achieve this high standard. After careful research, the team is ready to refurbish end-of-business-life laptops (around 1,500 each year) which can be allocated to patients, service users and carers identified by frontline teams and local charities as digitally excluded. Devices refurbished in-house will be paired with free mobile data from the National Databank. Another NHS Foundation Trust is currently arranging to donate end-of-life devices to a council-run device bank.

Circular electronics for social good: one model, many pathways

Interviews revealed growing interest in device donation to reduce digital exclusion. Increasingly, the question is not 'why' but 'how'.

While the 'circular electronics for social good' model¹² applies equally in the public sector, we identified a variety of pathways through the model, reflecting differences in how involved public sector organisations wanted to be at each stage.

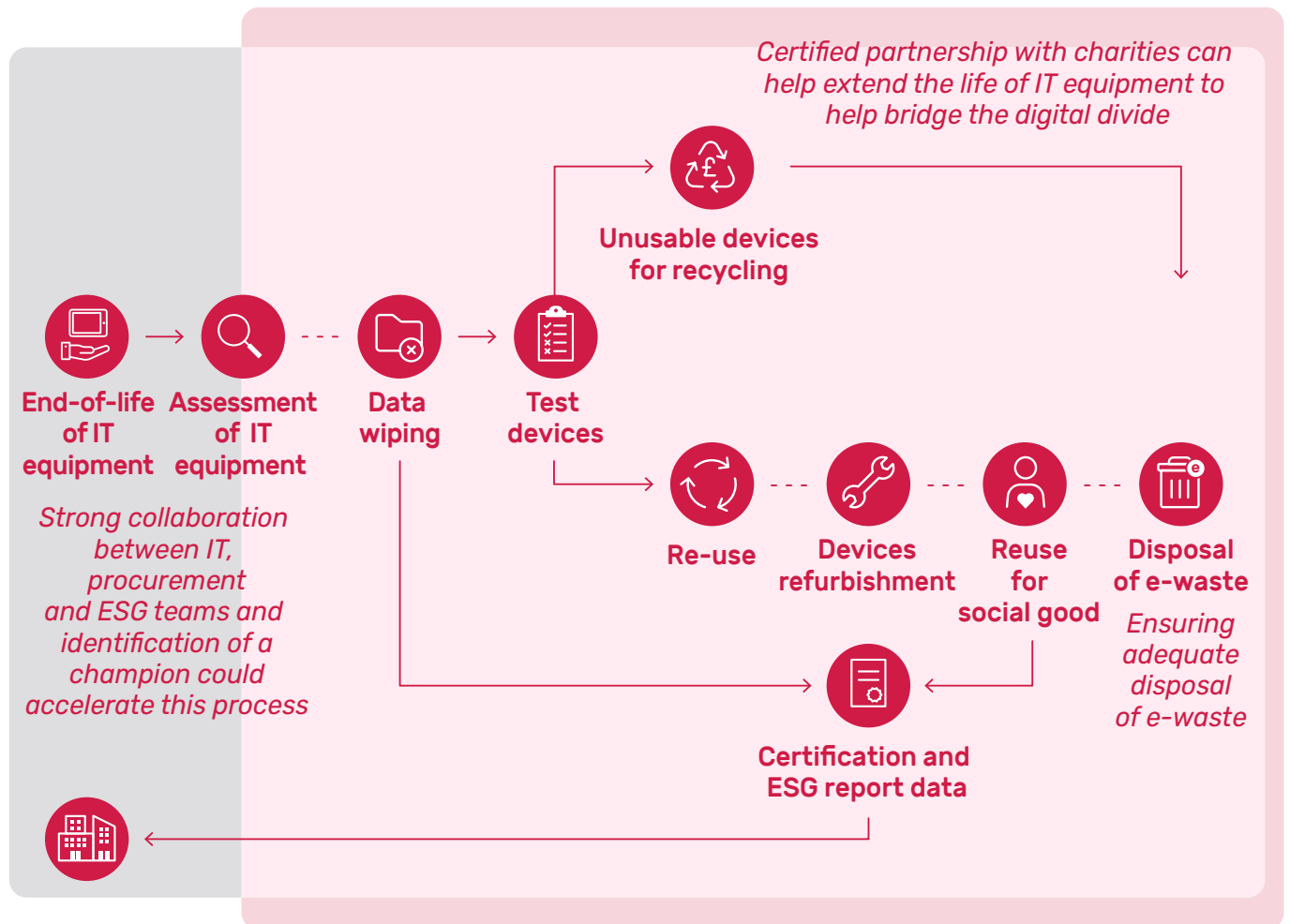
A few organisations opted to deliver the end-to-end process in-house, using staff to do data wiping, testing, and refurbishment. Sometimes, this extended to installing new operating systems and distributing devices to local charities or libraries. In one case, this extended to distributing devices to service users identified by frontline teams.

A more common pathway was partnering with others. Public sector organisations identified the stage when IT equipment, responsibilities and liabilities would be passed on. Often, this was to the National Device Bank or a local refurbishment charity or social enterprise. Some had an interim step, where an existing supplier wiped data before passing devices to another partner for refurbishment and/or distribution.

Choices were shaped less by sector (e.g. health, education, local authority) and more by:

- **Culture** - all choices reflected assessments of risks, liabilities and quality assurance; final choices reflected organisational culture more than legal, policy or regulatory frameworks.
- **Cost and capacity** - appropriate use of public monies and funding constraints meant cost-neutral or low-cost solutions were essential. At each stage, decisions were needed about how any additional costs would be covered.
- **Commitments**, such as sustainable procurement, increased circularity in IT products or services, reducing e-waste and using products for longer.
- **Asset management** - choices reflected the extent of internal reuse of devices, IT refresh cycles, level of centralisation including registers, processes to collect devices when staff leave, and existing supplier contracts. Office moves, IT refreshes, and IT contracts coming up for review were timely catalysts to consider device donation.
- **Wider initiatives** increased visibility of device donation for social good, such as the National Device Bank and its relationship with Get Online London and LOTI.

Circular electronics for social good model



Key

- Donating organisations
- Civil society organisations
- Transportation cost

Creating your own pathway to circular electronics for social good: Checklists

Step 1 Knowing your organisation

- I know donating IT equipment for reuse could support our net-zero goals and our social impact goals

- I know who is responsible for deciding what happens to end-of-life IT equipment

- I know what happens currently with end-of-life IT equipment and any existing contractual commitments around asset disposal that need to be considered

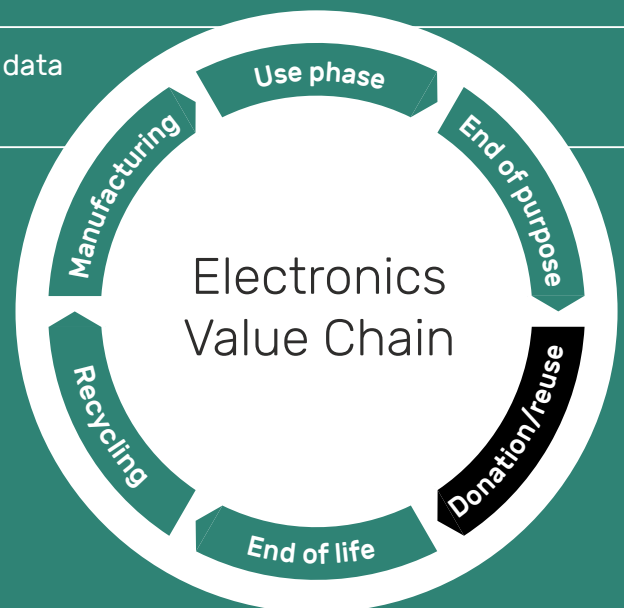
- I know that the benefits (social, environmental, employee engagement) of donating devices to fix the digital divide outweigh the cash rebate (if any received)

Step 2 Deciding a reuse pathway which works for your organisation

Stage in the Circular Electronics for Social Good model	We choose to do this:	
	In-house	With a Partner
Identifying end-of-life IT assets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Assessing what has potential for reuse and what has to be recycled	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Data wiping to required standards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Testing to sort what is suitable for reuse, recycling, or disposal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Refurbishing to high standard for digitally excluded people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pairing devices with free data connectivity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Deciding who receives devices	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Distributing devices to recipients	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Digital inclusion support for recipients	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reporting - ESG metrics and stories of digital inclusion impact	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Secure storage and/or transport for each step of the journey	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Step 3 Final checks

- Senior commitment is in place to reuse IT equipment to bridge the digital divide
- The end-of-life IT equipment has served its purpose in our organisation
- Reporting processes are in place to provide metrics and stories of positive impact
- External partners have the required and accredited expertise
- In-house partners have the required and accredited expertise
- Our pathway complies with legislation and regulation on data security and e-waste
- Our pathway is cost-effective (no cost or low cost)
- There is clarity on which organisations or partners cover which costs
- Agreements are in place on quality assurance, responsibilities and liabilities
- Appropriate mechanisms are in place to decide who receives devices
- Devices will be refurbished to a suitably high standard for digitally excluded adults
- Devices will be provided with free mobile data connectivity and digital skills support



Circular electronics for social good value chain

Conclusions

Public sector organisations can create their own pathway within a 'circular electronics for social good' model. Pioneers are showing the way.

Reusing IT equipment to tackle digital exclusion is a powerful example of innovation which delivers social and environmental benefits. Our research with public sector leaders shows it is gaining traction.

We found that the overarching 'circular electronics for social good' model holds, with similar enablers and barriers to those identified by businesses in the private sector, albeit with some additional considerations reflecting public sector duties and funding. Sector differences were less evident than differences between organisations. What makes the difference - more than sector, legal, policy or regulatory frameworks - is organisational culture and leadership.

The diversity of pathways through the model holds an important message: public sector organisations and businesses can create their own path to circular electronics for social good. They can choose which stages of the end-to-end process they want to own and do in-house, and which stages they want to outsource or do through certified, reputable partners. They can choose whether to deliver a local scheme (in-house or with partners) or be part of a national scheme (like the National Device Bank) or do a mix of both. Creating the right pathway to suit the organisation, with the right partners, and with regular reports on the social and environmental benefits, is the key to making it 'business as usual'.

Worryingly high levels of digital exclusion among clients and users of public services is a powerful motivation for public sector leaders to 'do the right thing' and prioritise reuse of IT equipment, over recycling, to help fix the digital divide. There is an emerging ecosystem of complementary schemes and reputable, experienced partners. Pioneers in the public sector - alongside pioneers in the private sector - are leading the way.

Methodology

This research was funded by Research Council England and conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Liverpool's Digital Media and Society Institute, together with Good Things Foundation. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Liverpool.

Qualitative data was collected from 30 semi-structured online interviews (May - June 2023) with senior leaders and managers working in 27 organisations, mainly national agencies, government bodies (central, devolved, regional, local authorities), universities and colleges, and NHS bodies. Interviews were transcribed, coded and thematically analysed by two researchers to establish and refine key themes. All examples and quotes used in this report have been anonymised. We have also included stories, quotes and images from Good Things Foundation's National Device Bank to bring to life the value of refurbished devices for people facing digital barriers.

This project was designed to complement and build on recent research - an affiliated project of the Circular Electronics Partnership with Deloitte and Good Things Foundation (2023), [Circular Electronics for Social Good: Reusing IT Equipment to Bridge the Digital Divide](#).

Endnotes

- 1 Good Things Foundation, Deloitte and Circular Electronics Partnership (2023), [Circular Electronics for Social Good: Reusing IT equipment to bridge the digital divide](#).
- 2 DSIT (2023), [Response to House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee Report](#)
- 3 House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee (2023), [Digital exclusion report](#)
- 4 Good Things Foundation (2023) management information and network member survey findings
- 5 HMT (2022), [Sustainability Reporting Guidance](#) (see Chapter 6)
- 6 Defra (2020), [Greening Government: ICT and Digital Services Strategy 2022-2025](#)
- 7 Good Things Foundation (2023), [Digital Nation UK 2023](#)
- 8 Blackwell, C et al (2023), [A UK Minimum Digital Living Standard for Households with Children: Interim report](#). MDLS project website: www.mdls.org.uk
- 9 Defra Digital, Data and Technology (2023), [Why sustainable ICT is vital](#)
- 10 Material Focus (2023), [Business Electrical Waste](#)
- 11 Circular Electronics Partnership website: www.cep2030.org
- 12 Good Things Foundation, Deloitte and Circular Electronics Partnership (2023), [Circular Electronics for Social Good: Reusing IT equipment to bridge the digital divide](#).

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