



Gary Nevison is chairman of the AFDEC RoHS team, board director at Electronics Yorkshire and head of product market strategy at Farnell InOne. As such he is our industry expert who will try and answer any questions that you might have relating to the issues of RoHS, WEEE and REACH. Your questions will be published together with Gary's answers in the following issues of Electronics World.

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What is the WEEE directive?

The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) regulations were laid before parliament on 12th December 2006 and came into force on 2nd January 2007. Under the legislation, Producers* have to take financial responsibility for products at the end of their useful life. The primary purpose of the Directive is to reduce the level of disposal to landfill by encouraging the re-use, repair/upgrade, efficient recycling and recovery of WEEE.

The Directive lays a duty upon EU Member States and is issued under Article 175 of the Treaty of Rome allowing each Member State to transpose the Directive into its own regulations which vary from State to State.

*Producers are defined as a party who:

- Manufactures and sells Electrical and Electronic Equipment (EEE) in an EU Member State under their own brand
- Sells under their own brand equipment produced by another manufacturer
- Imports or exports EEE on a professional basis into an EU Member State

Anyone who manufactures, brands, imports, sells, stores, treats or dismantles EEE will be affected by the legislation.

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Why is it needed?

Currently over one million tonnes of WEEE goes to landfill per year in the UK alone. This is unsustainable and aside from the fact that landfill sites are being created and filled at an alarming rate, this method of WEEE disposal is causing the loss of around 400,000 tonnes of ferrous metal, 200,000 tonnes of plastic, 100,000 tonnes of copper and 50,000 tonnes each of aluminium and glass. Most of that is recoverable and recyclable.

The WEEE directive will encourage the separate collection of WEEE and the treatment, re-use, recovery, recycling and sound environmental disposal of electrical and electronic equipment.

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Are any product types exempt from the WEEE directive?

Certain types of EEE are exempt from the regulations, these include:

- Equipment that doesn't need electricity to work;
- Equipment that is part of another type of equipment which is outside the scope of the WEEE regulations, such as aircraft and vehicles;
- Equipment designed to protect the UK's national security or that is used for a military purpose;
- Household lighting;
- Large stationary industrial tools – permanently fixed at a given place in industrial machinery or an industrial location;
- Medical implants and infected medical equipment.

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How does the WEEE directive impact electronic product design?

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Designers will be encouraged to consider the product lifecycle and ease of recycling at end of life right at the beginning of their new product design process. The starting point for this is to understand what causes the user to discard a product at end-of-life and then what happens to it.

It is fair to say that the recent introduction of numerous directives including WEEE has added a whole new dimension to the role of the electronics/electromechanical design engineer.

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How will it be enforced?

The Environment Agency will enforce and monitor compliance with the WEE directive. Their role will include:

- Approval of producer compliance schemes;
- Management of data on market share, WEEE collection, treatment and reprocessing;
- Registration of producers of EEE and maintenance of a public register;
- Identification of 'free-riders' and bringing them into compliance;
- Regulation of sites that will store and treat WEEE;
- Approval of treatment facilities and exporters of WEEE so that they are able to issue evidence of treatment and recovery.

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What are the responsibilities on electronic equipment producers?

All producers of electrical and electronic equipment (except those that fall into the categories described earlier) are required to register and join a compliance scheme.

They have to provide information on 'new' EEE to assist in its treatment, recycling and re-use. This will include information on the various components and materials in the product and the location of any hazardous substances.

All goods should be marked with the crossed out 'wheelie bin' symbol to identify and separate them from other waste streams. All equipment covered by the directive should also carry a producer identification mark indicating that it was placed on the market after 13th August 2005. A thick bar underneath the wheelie bin symbol can be used to show this.

Producers are financially responsible for collecting, treating, recovering, recycling and disposing in a sound environmental way an equivalent amount of WEEE to that which they produce. In order to do this they are obliged to put an appropriate compliance scheme in place or, less likely, set one up themselves.

Finally, producers will need to clearly understand the differences and implications of household and non-household WEEE.

Please email your questions to:

svetlana.josifovska@stjohnpatrick.com

marking them as RoHS or WEEE