# UK textile recycling sector faces collapse with £64 million annual burden looming



The UK’s textile recycling sector is on the precipice of collapse, a warning issued by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) has indicated. This environmental NGO’s recent report highlights that the industry's present trajectory could lead to unsustainable financial losses, with local authorities, charities, and consumers potentially facing a £64 million annual burden should the sector cease to operate effectively. The repercussions extend far beyond monetary implications, encompassing significant environmental damage and an increased carbon footprint.

According to WRAP, the 'Transitioning to a UK Circular Textiles Ecosystem Report' provides a stark warning: with many businesses already operating at a loss, the industry is barrelling towards failure. Presently, the sector incurs losses that amount to approximately £88 million each year, stemming from the processing of non-reusable textiles (NRTs). Each year, sorters lose between £350 and £430 for individual tonnes of NRTs, representing a significant financial strain in a market already grappling with the impacts of fast fashion.

Fast fashion has led to a proliferation of low-quality garments that flood the market, diluting the resale value of second-hand items and complicating recycling efforts due to mixed materials. In light of this saturation, WRAP reports a troubling trend: nearly half of all used textiles—approximately 711,000 tonnes—are discarded into general waste rather than being reused or recycled. This influx equates to 30,000 shipping containers of cast-off clothing entering waste streams annually. Alarming figures reveal a staggering 57.5% drop in the price per tonne for textile bank donations over the past decade, crippling the financial sustainability of the recycling sector.

External factors compound the crisis further. Geopolitical tensions have disrupted vital trade routes, particularly through the Red Sea, driving up shipping costs and delaying the movement of goods. Export challenges, especially to destination countries in Africa and Asia, have been exacerbated by rising import duties and local market saturation, which, in turn, has led to diminished demand for used textiles and plummeting resale values.

Local authorities bear the brunt of this unsustainable situation, currently spending £73 million annually on gate fees for the disposal of textiles that end up in general waste. The prospect of the used textiles sector collapsing poses the terrifying risk of these costs surging to £200 million by 2035 if no structural changes are made, with councils potentially left solely responsible for managing textile waste. This situation threatens to increase pressure on already overstretched waste systems, which struggle to cope with rising volumes of textile waste.

Catherine David, the incoming CEO at WRAP, has articulated the gravity of the situation: “The charity sector plays a vital role in enabling a circular economy for fashion in the UK—a role it has been playing for over a hundred years. The sector now faces a crisis, with storage rooms up and down the country bursting with unsellable stock.” As a result, charities are increasingly unable to generate revenue, which in turn restrains the broader circular economy for textiles.

In response to this mounting crisis, WRAP has proposed a series of vital solutions centred around enhancing infrastructure and collaboration within the used textiles sector. Their recommendations include investing in advanced sorting technologies capable of efficiently processing textiles for recycling. According to Cyndi Rhoades, Co-Founder and CEO of Circle-8 Textile Ecosystems, “Non-reusable textiles are not waste, they are resources... These resources will replace the use of virgin materials in textile production.”

The report also advocates for the introduction of a mandatory Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme, placing accountability for end-of-life management squarely on producers. Such a scheme would incentivise sustainable design practices and aid in financing the necessary infrastructure to facilitate better sorting and recycling.

Moreover, WRAP has called for a thorough overhaul of retailer take-back schemes, which are often inconsistent and lack transparency. A new framework for collaboration between brands, collectors, and sorters is vital to create more effective systems for textile recovery, which includes shared standards and enhanced public engagement.

As the industry grapples with these substantial challenges, the call to action from WRAP is clear: collaborative efforts from all stakeholders are essential to avert collapse and foster a robust circular economy for textiles in the UK.

The future of the UK's textile recycling sector hangs in the balance, and unless urgent, systemic changes are implemented, it risks descending into a crisis with devastating financial and environmental consequences.

### Reference Map

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## Bibliography

1. <https://resource.co/article/wrap-warns-looming-collapse-uk-used-textiles-sector> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.wrap.org.uk/content/textiles-market-situation-report-2024> - The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) released the 'Textiles Market Situation Report 2024', detailing the UK's textile consumption and disposal patterns. In 2022, the UK consumed 1.42 million tonnes of new textile products. However, 1.45 million tonnes of used textiles were generated, with 711,000 tonnes discarded into general waste, equating to nearly 30,000 shipping containers of cast-off fashion annually. The report highlights a 57.5% reduction in the price per tonne for textile bank donations and a 41% reduction for charity shop donations over the past decade, underscoring the financial challenges faced by the reuse and recycling sectors. WRAP calls for increased support to prevent environmental degradation and promote a circular economy for textiles.
3. <https://www.wrap.org.uk/content/price-our-addiction-cheap-fast-fashion-pressure-builds-uk-second-hand-clothing-market> - WRAP's research reveals that nearly 49% of all used textiles in the UK are discarded in general waste, with each person throwing away an average of 35 items annually. The influx of low-quality fast fashion has led to a significant decline in the value of donated textiles, with prices dropping by 57.5% for textile banks and 41% for charity shops over the past decade. This saturation challenges the financial viability of the reuse and recycling sectors. WRAP urges brands, retailers, investors, and governments to support the UK's textiles reuse and recycling sector through grants, investment, and legislation to foster a more circular fashion ecosystem.
4. <https://www.textilerecyclingassociation.org/press/textile-recycling-sector-faces-unprecedented-financial-crisis-amid-global-market-challenges/> - The Textile Recycling Association (TRA) warns of an imminent collapse in the UK's textile recycling sector due to global market challenges. As the trade association for over 75% of the UK's used textiles collectors and sorters, TRA reports that members are reaching capacity at processing plants, leading to fears of being unable to collect from charity shops, recycling centres, and community textile banks. The potential collapse poses severe environmental risks, including increased microplastic pollution, water contamination, and accumulation of textile waste in landfills. TRA emphasizes the need for regulatory intervention to prevent the sector's downfall and recommends the introduction of an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) scheme.
5. <https://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/sustainability-news/uk-s-textile-recycling-crisis-infrastructure-gaps-export-challenges-294705-newsdetails.htm> - The UK's textile recycling sector faces a crisis due to infrastructure gaps and export challenges. Despite the UK's commitment to a circular economy, the country lacks sufficient recycling infrastructure, leading to the export of a significant amount of disposed apparel to African nations, destabilizing their environment. In 2022, approximately 711,000 tonnes of used textiles were discarded into general waste, with 84% incinerated and 11% sent to landfill. The disparity between the number of sorting and recycling firms exacerbates the issue, with only around 14 recycling firms active in the UK as of 2024, compared to approximately 50 sorting firms. This imbalance threatens the viability of textile recycling initiatives in the UK.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/apr/29/you-sold-it-now-recycle-it-the-protesters-mailing-worn-out-clothes-to-the-shops-they-bought-them-from> - In response to the UK's textile recycling crisis, activists are mailing worn-out clothes back to the retailers from whom they were purchased. A forthcoming WRAP report indicates that the UK's worn-out textiles are costing collectors and sorters £88 million annually to collect and process. This financial burden has led to predictions that textile banks may disappear, charity shops may cease accepting donations, and charities may have to pay to incinerate waste, resulting in increased landfill usage. The loss of revenue is expected to be fatal for some businesses, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change in the textile recycling sector.
7. <https://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/sustainability-news/tra-warns-of-imminent-collapse-in-uk-s-textile-recycling-sector-294280-newsdetails.htm> - The Textile Recycling Association (TRA) warns of an imminent collapse in the UK's textile recycling sector due to global market challenges. The failure to collect waste textiles poses severe environmental risks, including increased microplastic pollution, water contamination, and accumulation of textile waste in landfills. Globally, 92 million tonnes of textile waste are produced each year, equivalent to a rubbish truck's worth of textiles being discarded every second. The used textiles industry in the UK is valued at over £1 billion annually, impacting sectors such as UK charities, local waste authorities, logistics, and packaging industries. The sector's downfall could affect one in every 25 jobs across the country.