



# Log on for suite deals

## What's the story with free household goods?

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**W**ould you like to fill your house with perfectly functional furniture for free? Or have you recently upgraded your three-piece suite and find yourself at a loss as to what to do with the old one?

If you're looking to get something for nothing or to get rid of something for nothing, then look no further than Free Trade, the Dublin local authority's online initiative aimed at helping people pass on their unwanted household items rather than send them to landfill.

No longer do rowing machines or treadmills - bought in haste but left to gather dust at leisure - need to spend years lounging about reminding lazy owners of the svelte body that might have been. Instead they can be disposed of guilt-free through the recently launched site. With local authority funding, it should have a larger reach than some of the alternatives. If it is successful it will significantly reduce the amount of working products that find their way needlessly into landfills around the city, while at the same time saving consumers on both sides of the transaction a fortune.

The site currently has 22 categories of household items including baby goods, clothes, electronics and computers. By the middle of last week more than 250 people had signed up to give things away, with the furniture category attracting the largest amount of interest. More than half of those who had registered with the site had furniture to get rid of. Kitchen tables and chairs, doors, bunk beds and leather three-piece suites were among the items looking for a new home.

Not many people included images of their offerings, making it difficult to establish the quality of the goods. But if you show up to collect your "three-piece suite in perfect condition" and it turns out to be a flea-ridden, holy-show of a thing with a family of rats nesting among the rusting springs you can always walk away - it's not like it cost you anything.

In the electronics section, widescreen TVs, computer monitors and fax machines are also up for grabs. One person was giving away a 26-inch widescreen TV in good condition, although it "sometimes switches itself off when used with

Coax aerial. No problems when used with Scart." Still, at a cost of completely free, it's a good deal.

Other electronic items seem less attractive, however - how much does anyone really need a BBC computer from the 1980s, or a Unison set-top box which grants pretty slow access to a small part of the Internet? Other stand-out items included an "as new corner spa bath" a Stanley 80 solid fuel cooker, a 14-month-old fully functional fridge and an upright piano which "might suit beginner or someone who wants to try piano for a while without the expense of buying. Because of its age needs tuning three-four times a year. Not suitable for proficient musician."

"People moving house or re-decorating often want to change their suite of furniture or TV but can't trade in the old one and that's where [www.dublinwaste.ie](http://www.dublinwaste.ie) comes in," senior executive officer with Dublin City Council, Hugh Coughlan, said when launching the scheme. "The website allows them to advertise items for free and advises on how to make contact with prospective new owners."

"We envisage Free Trade being very popular among first-time buyers, students and landlords, but we would encourage everybody in Dublin who is looking for household goods to check out the website before rushing out to spend money on new goods, because everything on the site is usually in good condition and is absolutely free," Coughlan said.

We rang a number of other local authorities around the country but none we spoke to was offering an online trading service similar to the Dublin scheme. For its part the Department of the Environment said that while it "actively encouraged" such initiatives it has no plans to require local authorities to set up such web-based facilities. A spokesman said that the extension of the facility to other areas "would be a matter for the relevant local authorities".

**THE COST** OF disposing of waste has risen dramatically in the past decade. In 1996, landfill costs stood at between £15 and £20 per tonne compared with £100 to £120 today. Recycling packaging is cheaper but still costs in the region of €80 per home to manage. Dún Laoghaire-Rath-

down County Council's recycling facility cost €2 million to operate last year, but took in just €1 million in fees. To cover at least some of that shortfall, earlier this month the Department of the Environment allocated €4 million to assist all local authorities with their recycling facility operating costs.

While the money is sure to be welcomed, it is also sure to be insufficient - hence the push towards encouraging people to reuse more than recycle. The local authorities are following a trend established by "underground" communities such as the Freecycle Network. It was started in May 2003 to promote waste reduction in Tucson, Arizona, and help save desert landscape from being taken over by landfills. Like Free Trade, it offers individuals and non-profit organisations a forum to "recycle" unwanted items. "One person's trash can truly be another's treasure," it promises. It has certainly proved to be successful: last week it had 2,553,423 members including more than 4,400 in Ireland.

Freecycle is not the only competitor to the local authorities: JumbleTown is another independent non-commercial site, while CheapCycle offers a good deal of free and very cheap items throughout Ireland.

If you still can't get shot of your useless treadmill or old computer on any one of these sites, there is still no need to despair. TechRec, based in Dublin's Park West, specialises in recycling WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) and is running an open day next Saturday. The public is invited to bring all old, unwanted electrical appliances which the company will dispose of for free for one day only. Refreshments and entertainment will be offered.

◆ For more information visit [www.dublinwaste.ie](http://www.dublinwaste.ie); [www.freecycle.org](http://www.freecycle.org); [www.jumbletown.ie](http://www.jumbletown.ie); [groups.yahoo.com/group/CheapCycleIreland](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CheapCycleIreland)