Journal Publication of International Research for Engineering and Management (JOIREM)
Volume: 04 Issue: 03 | Mar-2026
ISSN (O) 3107-6696

Sustainable and Compliant Plasterboard Waste Management in UK Construction

A Comparative and Critical Analysis of Waste Stream Performance within the Park Lane Redevelopment Project

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Abstract- The UK construction industry generates approximately 120 million tonnes of waste annually, presenting significant environmental and regulatory challenges. Although concrete, timber and metals dominate by volume, plasterboard waste presents disproportionate environmental risk due to hydrogen sulphide generation under anaerobic landfill conditions. This study critically evaluates plasterboard waste management within the Park Lane Redevelopment Project in Central London and compares its regulatory complexity, environmental impact and circular economy potential with other major construction waste streams.

Using a mixed-method case study approach, findings indicate that structured segregation, compaction strategies and recycling partnerships achieved a 92% compliance rate and reduced contamination by 35% within six weeks. Compared with concrete and timber, plasterboard demonstrates higher regulatory sensitivity but stronger circular reintegration potential when effectively managed. The study argues that gypsum waste management should be treated as a strategic sustainability priority rather than merely a compliance obligation and proposes a transferable framework aligned with the UK Net Zero 2050 strategy.

Keywords: Construction waste management; Plasterboard recycling; Gypsum waste; Circular economy; Regulatory compliance; Hydrogen sulphide risk; Net Zero construction; Urban redevelopment.

1. Introduction

Construction and demolition waste constitutes the largest waste stream in the United Kingdom, accounting for approximately 60% of total material waste generation. Within this context, plasterboard represented approximately 15% of total site waste at the Park Lane Redevelopment Project in Central London.

Unlike inert materials such as concrete, plasterboard presents chemical reactivity risks when co-disposed with biodegradable waste. Under anaerobic landfill conditions, gypsum-based products may generate hydrogen sulphide (H_2S), a toxic gas that poses environmental and occupational hazards. Consequently, plasterboard disposal is subject to strict segregation requirements under the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2010 and the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

While concrete recycling and timber reuse are widely studied in academic literature, plasterboard waste has received comparatively limited analytical attention. This study addresses that gap by evaluating plasterboard management performance and positioning it within the broader hierarchy of construction waste streams.

2. Literature and Theoretical Context

2.1 Construction Waste Hierarchy

The waste hierarchy prioritises prevention, reuse, recycling, recovery and disposal. However, practical implementation differs substantially across materials.

Concrete typically dominates by volume and is supported by mature aggregate recycling infrastructure. Timber presents moderate regulatory risk and offers biomass and reuse pathways. Metals benefit from established global recovery markets and strong circular integration.

Plasterboard, although lower in volume, carries higher regulatory sensitivity due to hydrogen sulphide risk. Its environmental significance derives from chemical instability rather than mass contribution.

2.2 Circular Economy and Material Flow

Gypsum offers genuine closed-loop recycling potential. Recovered gypsum can be reintroduced into plasterboard manufacturing or repurposed in agriculture as a soil conditioner. This dual-use pathway distinguishes plasterboard from concrete, which is commonly downcycled into lower-grade aggregate products.

2.3 Net Zero Carbon Implications

Concrete possesses significantly higher embodied carbon per tonne than plasterboard. However, mismanaged plasterboard contributes to secondary emissions through landfill gas generation. Although its carbon intensity per tonne is lower, its hazard risk per unit mass is comparatively higher. Effective gypsum segregation therefore represents a targeted intervention within broader Net Zero strategies.

3. Methodology

A mixed-method case study design was adopted using both quantitative and qualitative data sources.

Quantitative analysis included weekly compliance rates, contamination trends and waste composition breakdown. Qualitative insights were drawn from supervision reports, subcontractor behaviour observations and training feedback. Data were sourced from project audit records on the Park Lane Redevelopment Project.

4. Implementation Framework

Dedicated plasterboard skips were introduced across the site to ensure segregation from general waste. Monitoring protocols were strengthened to minimise cross-contamination.

Mechanical compaction reduced transportation frequency, while just-in-time procurement reduced offcut generation. This preventative strategy aligned more closely with timber waste optimisation models than with conventional demolition-driven concrete recovery.

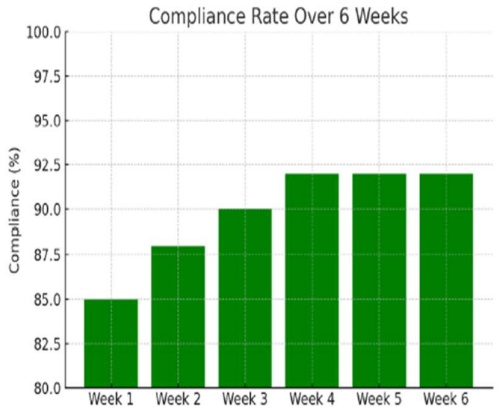
Recycling partnerships were established with RTS Waste to facilitate gypsum recovery and reintegration. Unlike metals, which operate within efficient global recycling markets, plasterboard recycling remains regionally dependent and infrastructure-sensitive.

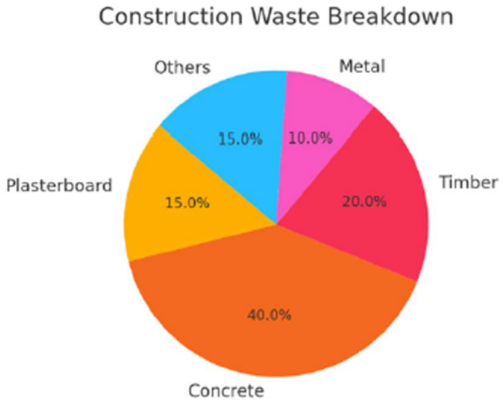
5. Performance Analysis

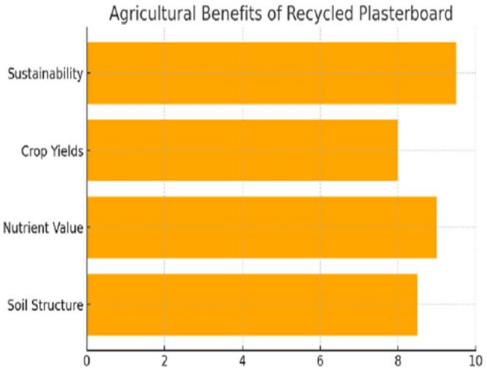
The site waste composition comprised approximately 40% concrete, 20% timber, 15% plasterboard, 10% metal and 15% miscellaneous materials. Although plasterboard was not the dominant stream by volume, its management complexity exceeded that of other materials.

Compliance improved from 85% during week one to 92% by week six. A 35% reduction in contamination was recorded over the same period. In contrast, concrete and timber waste streams exhibited relatively stable compliance performance due to already-established disposal systems.

These findings demonstrate strong short-term behavioural adaptability when supported by structured supervision and Visual Management Systems.







6. Critical Comparison with Other Waste Streams

Concrete presents high embodied carbon but low toxicity risk and benefits from mature recycling infrastructure. Timber offers renewable characteristics and biomass energy pathways, although contamination risk varies by source. Metals possess high scrap value and operate within efficient circular markets.

Plasterboard occupies a distinct position. While its embodied carbon is moderate, its regulatory sensitivity and chemical instability create elevated compliance requirements. Simultaneously, its closed-loop manufacturing and agricultural reuse pathways provide meaningful circular economy potential when effectively managed.

7. Discussion

The findings indicate that plasterboard waste management performance depends primarily on behavioural controls, supervision and system design rather than technological innovation. Unlike concrete and metals, where economic incentives drive recycling behaviour, plasterboard management remains predominantly compliance-driven.

However, emerging agricultural reuse pathways introduce economic value streams that shift gypsum from regulatory liability to strategic resource. The Park Lane case demonstrates that rapid compliance improvements are achievable within dense urban environments when structured systems are implemented.

8. Limitations

This study is limited to a single project context, restricting broader generalisability. Carbon reduction impacts were not fully quantified, and long-term behavioural sustainability requires further investigation. Future research should incorporate lifecycle carbon modelling across multiple construction projects.

9. Conclusion

Plasterboard waste management represents a strategically significant yet underexamined dimension of construction sustainability. Although concrete dominates carbon discourse, plasterboard presents unique chemical and regulatory complexities that demand targeted management frameworks.

The Park Lane case study demonstrates that compliance rates exceeding 90% and contamination reductions above one-third are achievable within six weeks of structured implementation. The study contributes by positioning plasterboard as a critical sustainability leverage point rather than a peripheral waste stream.

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