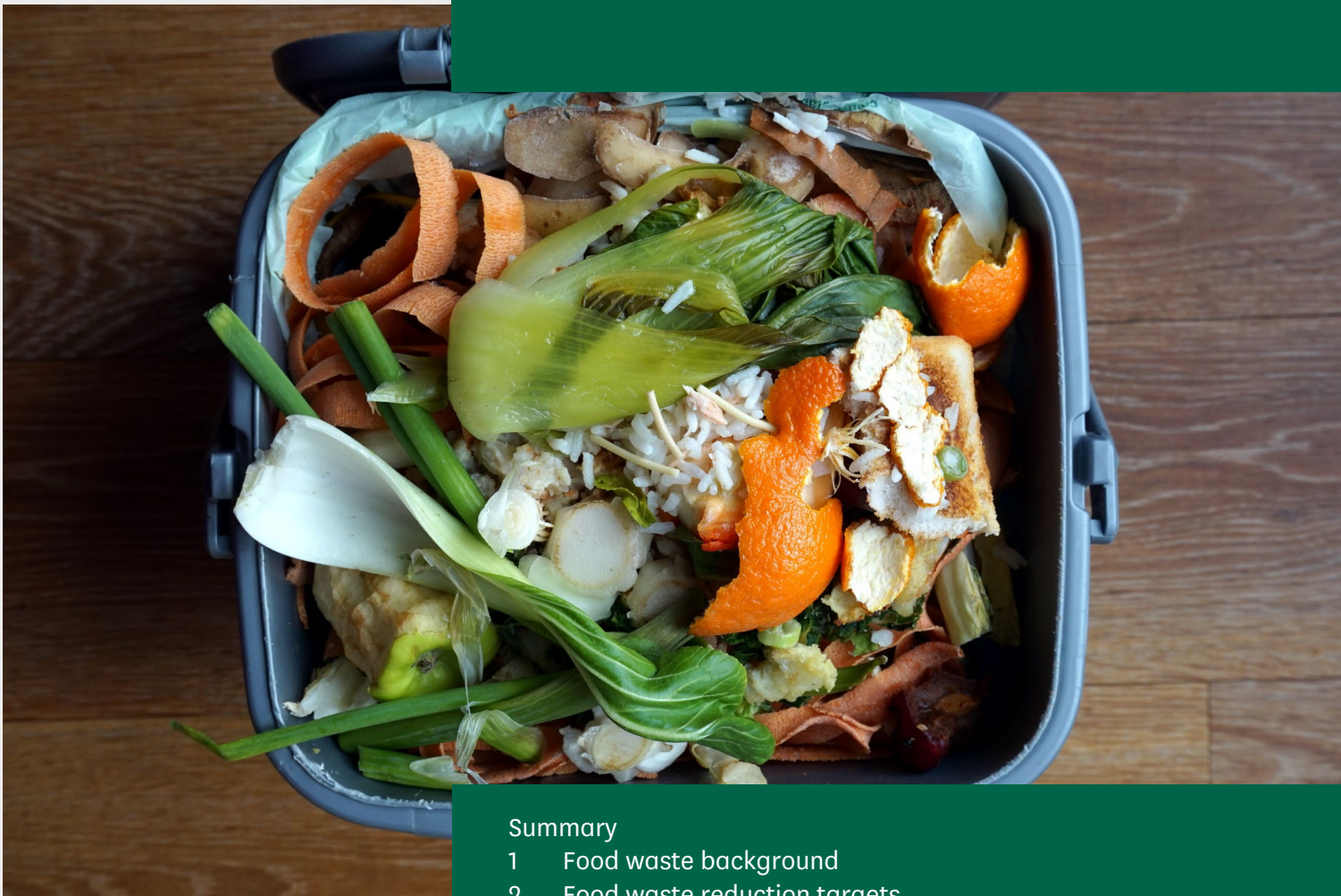


Research Briefing

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Food waste in the UK



Summary

- 1 Food waste background
- 2 Food waste reduction targets
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Summary

What is food waste?

There is no legal or universally accepted definition of “food waste”. In the UK, the charity Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) [defines food waste](#) as food and inedible parts sent to one of several waste disposal destinations:

- anaerobic digestion/codigestion
- composting/aerobic processes
- incineration/controlled combustion
- land application; landfill
- sewer/wastewater treatment
- not harvested/ploughed in (for crops)
- other (including unmanaged disposal).

How much food is wasted in the UK?

WRAP estimated that in 2021, [total food waste in the UK amounted to 10.7 million tonnes \(Mt\)](#). By weight, most food waste comes from households (60%), followed by farms (15%), manufacturing (13%) hospitality and food service (10%) and retail (2%).

However, there is less certainty about the scale of on-farm food waste because it is more difficult to measure. This is partly because food waste from farming is subject to the uncertainties of the natural world (such as the impact of weather on crop yields) and changes in consumer demand.

The value of the edible parts of household food waste (including waste to the sewer and home composting) in 2021 amounted to £17 billion. This is equivalent to £250 per person each year, or £1,000 for a family of four.

Environmental impact of food waste

[Food waste contributes to climate change and environmental degradation](#) in two ways; through release of gases (such as methane) from its breakdown in landfill and through waste of the energy and resources required to produce wasted food. Reducing food waste would mean fewer greenhouse gas emissions.

WRAP estimated that the greenhouse gas emissions associated with wasted food and drink in the UK accounted for approximately [18 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent in 2021 and 22](#). The foods that led to the highest greenhouse gas emissions from households were meat and fish, followed by whole meals, fresh vegetables and salads, and dairy and eggs.

Food waste reduction targets

Waste policy is devolved.

In England, there are no mandatory food waste reduction targets. The UK Government supports voluntary initiatives, including the [Courtauld Commitment 2030](#), which is delivered by WRAP working with industry and the devolved administrations. This commitment aims to help the UK deliver on its commitment under [Sustainable Development Goal 12.3](#), which is to halve food waste by 2030.

The Scottish Government has set out an [ambition to reduce per person food waste in Scotland to 33% by 2025](#), compared with a 2013 baseline.

The Welsh Government's [Beyond Recycling strategy](#) (2021) included a target of reducing avoidable food waste by 50% by 2025, relative to a 2007 baseline, and a reduction of 60% by 2030.

Northern Ireland [aims to meet the Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 target](#) to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030.

Actions to tackle food waste

There are various strategies and campaigns designed to reduce food waste across the supply chain and at household level. These include:

- Better recording of food waste data. For example, WRAP provides [guidance to help farmers record waste and surplus](#). The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) consulted in 2023 on [mandatory food waste reporting for large businesses in England](#). The

outcome of the consultation is not yet known and the UK Government has faced [legal action over its initial response to the consultation](#).

- Raising consumer awareness of food waste. Consumer-facing campaigns include the [Love Food Hate Waste](#) campaign and [Food Waste Action Week](#), both of which receive government funding.
- Improved date labelling, particularly to remove “use by” dates on fresh produce such as fruit, vegetable and dairy products. The [biggest reason for household food waste](#) in 2021-22 was food not used on time as it “either smelled or looked off, or was past the date on the label”.
- Selling [more fruit and vegetables uncut and loose](#) (free of packaging), which prolongs shelf life and enables customers to buy only what they need. This has the additional benefit of reducing packaging waste.
- Reducing waste in the hospitality and food service sector. For example, the [Guardians of Grub](#) campaign aims to reduce the £3 billion of food thrown away in the sector.
- Food redistribution. WRAP’s [Annual survey of redistribution organisations in the UK](#) estimated that the amount of redistributed surplus food totalled almost 170,000 tonnes in 2022. This was an increase of 133% from 2019. In February 2024, [the Prime Minister announced that there would be £15 million](#) made available “to redirect [food] surplus into the hands of those who need it”.

Food waste collection

As waste is devolved there are different requirements for households and businesses for food waste collection throughout the UK.

In England, there are currently no mandatory requirements for local authorities in England to collect food waste from households, although many do offer this service.

However, the UK Government intends to introduce [consistency in household and business recycling in England](#), including a separate food waste stream. These plans will require local authorities (in their capacity as waste collection authorities) to [offer a weekly collection of food waste from households](#). All non-household municipal premises in England will have to arrange for the separate collection of food waste, but they will not be required to have weekly collections.

The [new rules are expected to apply](#) in most local authorities in England from 31 March 2026 for households and from 31 March 2025 for non-household municipal premises.

All local authorities in Wales provide a household weekly food waste recycling service.

The Scottish Government states that 80% of households in Scotland have access to food recycling collections.

All councils in Northern Ireland offer a household food waste collection.

1 Food waste background

1.1 Definitions of food waste

There is no legal or universally accepted definition of “food waste”. This means that different definitions and methodologies are used when discussing, recording or reporting food waste. In addition, terms such as “food loss” and “food surplus” may be used to describe the fate of food that doesn’t reach the destination it was originally intended for. This can make comparisons between countries and over time periods difficult.

International definitions

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) considers food loss and waste to be “[the decrease in quantity or quality of food along the food supply chain](#)”. The FAO makes a distinction based on where in the food supply chain this happens:

- Food loss is defined as “the decrease in the quantity or quality of food resulting from decisions and actions by food suppliers in the chain, excluding retailers, food service providers and consumers”. It would include, for example, material removed from the food chain by non-human actions, such as pest attack or weather.¹ The FAO’s report on [The State of Food and Agriculture 2019](#) explained that “although there may be an economic loss, food diverted to other economic uses, such as animal feed, is not considered as quantitative food loss or waste. Similarly, inedible parts are not considered as food loss or waste”.
- Food waste is defined as “the decrease in the quantity or quality of food resulting from decisions and actions by retailers, food service providers and consumers”.²

The European Commission does not make a distinction between different parts of the supply chain and defines food waste as “discarded food and its associated inedible parts (such as bones or fruit cores)”. It considers that “food waste occurs at all stages of the food supply chain, from farm to fork”.³

¹ Institute of Food Science and Technology, [Food Waste](#), August 2020

² Food and Agriculture Organization, [The State of Food and Agriculture 2019](#), page xii

³ European Commission, [Frequently Asked Questions: Reducing Food Waste in the EU](#), accessed March 2024

UK definition

The [Waste and Resources Action Programme \(WRAP\)](#) is a climate action NGO and charity established in the UK in 2000. Its income primarily comes from UK government grants, but it also receives income from the devolved administrations, business contributions to its voluntary agreements and other sources.⁴

The definition of food waste provided by the charity Waste and Resources Action Plan (WRAP) is [based on the end destination of material, rather than where in the food supply chain it comes from](#):

Food waste describes any food and inedible parts sent to any of the following destinations: anaerobic digestion/codigestion; composting/aerobic processes; incineration/controlled combustion; land application; landfill; sewer/wastewater treatment; not harvested/ploughed in (for crops) or other (including unmanaged disposal).⁵

WRAP acknowledges that “the term food loss is used by some to represent a proportion of food that ends up being removed from the food supply chain”, and is “often differentiated from ‘food waste’ on the basis of the stage in the supply chain where the food is lost (e.g. on farm) or the reasons why the food is lost (e.g. due to ‘unintentional’ events such as disease or weather)”. However, as this can be difficult to determine consistently, WRAP tends to use the term food waste to cover all stages of the supply chain.⁶ In that respect, WRAP’s definition of food waste is closer to the European Commission’s definition than the FAO’s.

WRAP also provides a definition of food surplus:

Food surplus describes any food and inedible parts that are sent to the following: redistribution to people (e.g. through a charity or commercial redistributor); animal feed; bio-based materials/biochemical processing (e.g. feedstock for other industrial products).⁷

1.2

Where food waste comes from

The [Waste and Resources Action Programme \(WRAP\)](#) estimates total food waste in the UK in 2021 at 10.7 million tonnes (Mt). By weight, household food waste makes up 60% of the total (6.4 Mt), on-farm 15% (1.6 Mt), manufacturing 13% (1.4 Mt), hospitality and food service 10% (1.1 Mt), and retail 2% (0.2 Mt).⁸

⁴ WRAP, [Annual Report and Consolidated Accounts 2022-23](#), page 52

⁵ WRAP, [WRAP Food waste measurement roadmap 2020 Guidelines](#), September 2020, pages 15-16

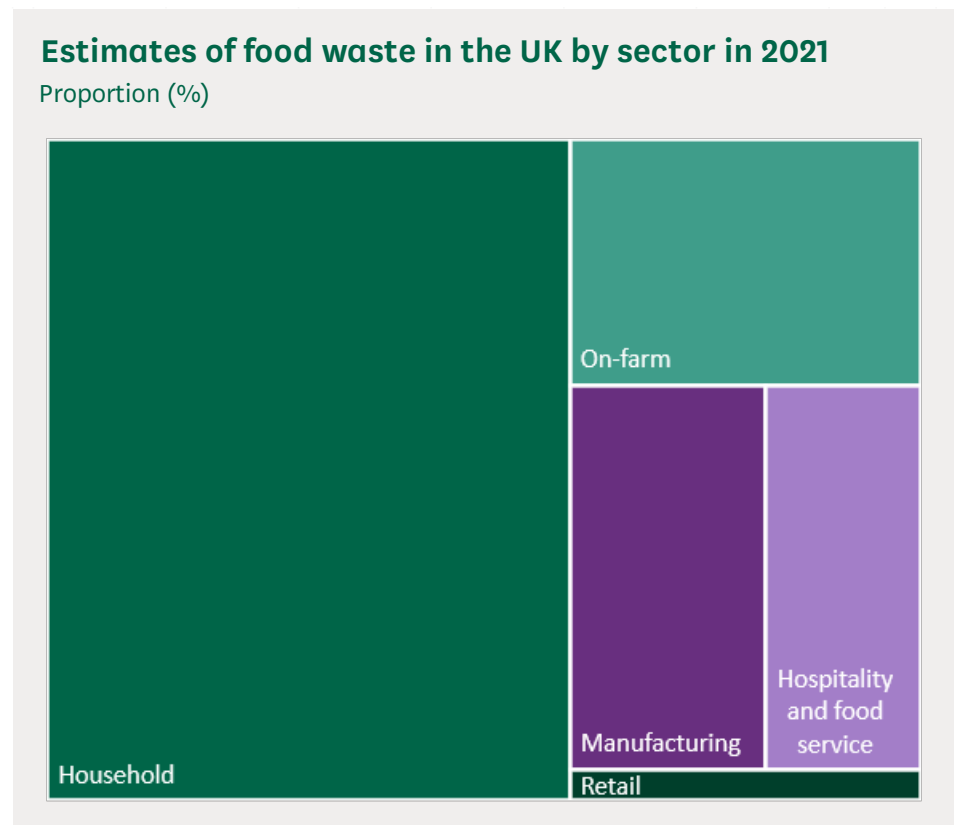
⁶ WRAP, [WRAP Food waste measurement roadmap 2020 Guidelines](#), September 2020, pages 15-16

⁷ WRAP, [WRAP Food waste measurement roadmap 2020 Guidelines](#), September 2020, pages 15-16

⁸ WRAP, [Food Surplus and Waste in the UK Key Facts](#), November 2023

In contrast with other parts of the food system, there is less certainty about the scale of on-farm food waste, with WRAP estimating this figure at 0.9 – 3.5Mt and the [World Wildlife Fund \(WWF\) providing an estimate of 3.3Mt](#). WRAP uses a central estimate of 1.6Mt. The National Farmers’ Union explains that:

Unlike the rest of supply chain, there is no reliable estimate for food waste pre-farm gate in the UK. This is mainly because farming is subject to the uncertainties of the natural world. Yields vary from year to year, as well as the quality, size and shape of the product, timing of harvest, and other factors such as customer demand.⁹



Source: WRAP, [Food Surplus and Waste in the UK Key Facts](#), November 2023

To contextualise, total food waste in the UK (10.7 Mt) is approximately one quarter of the 42 Mt of food that is purchased (the majority for consumption in the home).

The amount of food waste generated, as a percentage of the amounts of food purchased, is 18% for hospitality and food service sector, 16% for households, 3.8% for manufacturing and 0.4% for retail.

For the sectors above (excluding on-farm waste¹⁰), 6.4 Mt (71%) is wasted food which could have been avoided (also referred to as ‘edible parts’) and

⁹ National Farmers’ Union, [Where the NEU stands on food waste](#), 13 September 2023

¹⁰ On-farm wasted food is excluded as the percentage of inedible parts is unknown.

2.6 Mt (29%) was inedible parts (for example, eggshells, animal bones, inedible fruit peel).

Of the wasted food, the majority, 4.7 Mt, was from households, with 0.8 Mt from hospitality and food service, 0.7 Mt from manufacture and 0.2 Mt from retail.

Out of the 4.7 Mt of wasted household food, 39% (1.8 Mt) was wasted as it was not used in time, 22% (1.1 Mt) was personal preference, 15% (1.2 Mt) was cooked/prepared/served too much and 13% (0.6 Mt) was other.

Food waste trends

[WRAP research](#) shows that total post-farm gate food waste¹¹ was 7.8 Mt in 2021, which is 11% less than in 2007 (8.7 Mt). It found that per capita, the decrease was more significant with total post-farm gate food waste per capita at 116 kg in 2021, which is 18% less than in 2007 (142 kg).

For edible parts of food, the total post-farm gate wasted food was 5.4 Mt in 2021, which is 11% less than in 2007 (6.1 Mt). It found that per capita, the decrease was more significant with total post-farm gate food waste per capita at 81 kg in 2021, which is 18% less than in 2007 (99 kg).¹²

1.3

Impacts of food waste

Economic impact

According to [WRAP](#), the total value of wasted food (edible parts), excluding on-farm waste, was £21.8 billion in 2021. Of this, £17 billion was for households, £3.21 billion for hospitality and food service, £0.85 billion for manufacture and £0.74 billion for retail.

The value of wasted household food per person was £250 a year, or £600 for the average household (2.4 people) and £1,000 for a family of four.

There are also indirect costs as unnecessary food waste can push up the price of food for consumers and businesses. Reducing food waste can help food businesses cut costs, which can benefit customers.¹³

Climate change impact and greenhouse gas emissions

[Food waste](#) contributes to climate change and environmental degradation in two ways; firstly, through release of gases (such as methane) from its breakdown in landfill, and secondly, through the energy and resources

¹¹ Post-farm gate food waste excludes food waste produced on farms

¹² WRAP, [Food Surplus and Waste in the UK Key Facts](#), November 2023

¹³ Defra, [Impact Assessment for Improved Food Waste Reporting Consultation, 2022](#)

required to produce wasted food. Without food waste, there would be lower greenhouse gas emissions for the same amount of food consumed.

The United Nations Environment Programme [food waste index report](#) (2021) sets out that between 8-10% of global greenhouse gas emissions are associated with food that is not consumed.¹⁴

Quantifying the impacts and costs of food waste on the climate is challenging. Our World in Data have attempted to pin down [the carbon opportunity costs of food waste](#) (that is, the impact of food on climate change, and what could be achieved if food waste were reduced). It reported that if less land use was required for food production (as a result of reducing food waste or changing consumption patterns), it may be possible to grow more forests and wild grasslands, increasing carbon storage.¹⁵

The WRAP report on [household food and drink waste from 2021-22](#) estimates the greenhouse gas impact of food waste in the UK. This report finds that the greenhouse gas emissions associated with wasted food and drink in the UK accounted for approximately 18 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent in 2021-22 (compared to total emissions of 417.1 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent greenhouse gas emissions in 2022).¹⁶ It found that the food waste with the highest household greenhouse gas impacts were meat and fish, followed by whole meals, fresh vegetables and salads, and dairy and eggs.¹⁷

¹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), [Food waste index report](#), 2021

¹⁵ Our World in Data, [What are the carbon opportunity costs of food?](#) 19 March 2021, accessed 27 February 2024

¹⁶ WRAP, [Household food and drink waste in the United Kingdom 2021-22](#), 23 November 2023. To note, this figure is inclusive of the relevant elements of the food system (land use change, agriculture, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, retail, transport to the home, storage and preparation in the home, disposal); Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, [2022 UK carbon emissions statistics](#) (PDF), 30 March 2023.

¹⁷ WRAP, [Household food and drink waste in the United Kingdom 2021-22](#), 23 November 2023

2 Food waste reduction targets

2.1 Mandatory targets in England

In England, there are no mandatory food waste reduction targets. The UK Government currently supports voluntary initiatives (such as the Courtauld commitments outlined below) to deliver reductions in food waste within the food supply chain.

In its 2018 strategy [Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England](#), the UK government said that it would “consult on seeking powers for mandatory food waste prevention targets for appropriate food businesses and for surplus food redistribution obligations to be introduced subject to progress made by businesses to reduce food waste”.¹⁸ However, it has not yet consulted on mandatory targets.

The government has consulted on whether to introduce mandatory food waste reporting for large businesses, and on consistency in recycling collections, include food waste collection. These are discussed in sections 6 and 7 of this briefing respectively.

2.2 Voluntary targets in the UK

Courtauld Commitment 2030

On 27 September 2015, UN member states agreed to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be achieved by 2030. SDG 12, to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns, includes a [food waste target \(SDG 12.3\)](#):

By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses.

The UK Government’s 2023 strategy on preventing food waste in England explains that its main programme for meeting SDG 12.3 is the Courtauld Commitment 2030, a voluntary agreement managed by WRAP:

The government has supported change through a series of voluntary agreements with food businesses and consumer campaigns since 2007, managed by the Waste and Resources Action Programme. The latest of these,

¹⁸ Gov.uk, [Our waste, our resources: a strategy for England](#), December 2018

the Courtauld Commitment 2030, brings together organisations across the supply chain to reduce food waste to approach the targets in Sustainable Development Goal 12.3.¹⁹

WRAP describes the [Courtauld Commitment 2030](#) as its “flagship delivery agreement” that aims to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030.

The 2030 Commitment is [the latest in a series of agreements between government and the industry](#), first launched in 2005 at a Ministerial event at the Courtauld Gallery in London:

- [Phase 1](#) (2005-2009) considered new solutions and technologies so that less food and primary packaging ended up as household waste. It prevented 1.2 million tonnes of food and packaging waste, saving £1.8 billion and 3.3 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent emissions during the four-year phase. Two out of three of the original targets set were achieved: overall food waste was reduced; and packaging waste growth was stopped. However, total packaging waste was not reduced overall.²⁰
- [Phase 2](#) (2010-2012) aimed to further reduce primary packaging and household food and drink waste and in addition reduce secondary and tertiary packaging. A total of 1.7 million tonnes of waste was reduced through Phase 2, saving £3.1 billion and 4.8 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent emissions. The carbon impact of grocery packaging target of 10% reduction was met and the supply chain product and packaging waste target was exceeded (7.4% against a 5% target) but the household food and drink waste target was missed (3.7% reduction against a target of 4%).²¹
- [Phase 3](#) (2013-2015) aimed to reduce food waste in the home and the supply chain with specific measures such as designing packaging to help prevent food waste. In January 2017, WRAP published a report which showed a 3% reduction in ingredient, product and packaging waste in the supply chain (against a 3% target); and the packaging target was exceeded with a 7% reduction in CO₂ equivalent emissions. The recovery and recycling rate grew from 95% in 2012 to 99% in 2015. The target to reduce household food waste by 5% by 2015 was not achieved, with an apparent increase of 4% (estimated amount of 7.3 million tonnes in 2015 compared with 7.0 million tonnes in 2012).²²
- The [Hospitality and Food Service Agreement \(HaFSA\)](#) was a three-year voluntary agreement. It was launched in 2012 with the aim of reducing waste and increase recycling rates within the sector, across the UK. The HaFSA had two targets: (1) to reduce food and associated packaging waste by 5% by the end of 2015 (compared to a 2012 baseline), which

¹⁹ Gov.uk, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), July 2023

²⁰ WRAP, [Evaluation of Courtauld Food Waste Target – Phase 1](#), September 2010

²¹ WRAP, [Evaluation of Courtauld Food Waste Target – Phase 2](#), November 2013

²² WRAP, [Courtauld Commitment 3: Delivering action on waste \(final report\)](#), January 2017

was exceeded with an 11% reduction; and (2) to increase the overall rate of food and packaging waste recycled, sent to anaerobic digestion (AD) or composted to at least 70% by the end of 2015. This target was not fully met.²³

- The [Courtauld Commitment 2025](#) launched in 2015 as a 10-year voluntary agreement to 2025. It brought together the work of previous Courtauld phases and the HaFSA. It included the three targets (calculated as a relative reduction per head of population): (1) a 20% reduction in food and drink waste arising in the UK; (2) a 20% reduction in the greenhouse gas intensity of food and drink consumed in the UK; and (3) a reduction in impact associated with water use in the supply chain. The [Courtauld Commitment 2025 Milestone Progress Report](#) (July 2020) found that all three targets were on track to being achieved but noted that “With just ten years to go, we must seriously supercharge our efforts if we are going to get to the finishing line” of a 50% reduction by 2030.²⁴
- The [Courtauld Commitment 2030](#) evolved from Courtauld Commitment 2025 and was [announced by WRAP in July 2021](#), ahead of the international climate conference COP 26. WRAP explained that the change meant the Courtauld Commitment was aligned with the SDG’s global food waste reduction deadline of 2030. The three targets were recast to reflect this: (1) a 50% absolute reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions associated with food and drink consumed in the UK by 2030, against a 2015 baseline; (2) a 50% per capita reduction in food waste by 2030 vs the UK 2007 baseline; and (3) to achieve sustainable water management (quality and quantity) in the top 20 most important product and ingredient sourcing areas in the UK and overseas – covering 50% of product ingredients deemed ‘at risk’ from water insecurity.

[Signatories to the Courtauld Commitment](#) include the UK Government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland’s Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), as well as large supermarkets, manufacturers and wholesalers.

Food Waste Reduction Roadmap

The [Food Waste Reduction Roadmap](#) is a free initiative for UK food businesses, developed by industry in collaboration with WRAP, the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) and other Courtauld signatories.

The government policy paper, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#) (August 2023), explained that the roadmap “showcases actions that large businesses should take to address food waste in their own operations, support their suppliers in taking action,

²³ WRAP, [The Hospitality and Food Service Agreement: Taking Action on Waste \(final report\)](#), July 2020

²⁴ WRAP, [Courtauld Commitment Milestone Progress Report](#), July 2020

engage with consumers and innovate to reduce their food waste”. It added that “by the end of its fourth year, 300 of the largest UK food businesses across the supply chain had committed to the Roadmap. Of these, 221 provided evidence of measuring and acting on food waste. The ambition is to have all 600 large food businesses doing so by 2026”.²⁵

2.3

Scotland

The Scottish government published a [Food waste reduction action plan](#) in April 2019. It set out an ambition to reduce per capita food waste in Scotland to 33% by 2025, compared to a 2013 baseline. This target was more ambitious than the Courtauld Commitment 2025, although the Scottish Government was a signatory and supporter of the agreement.

On 18 January 2024, the Scottish Government published [a review of the action plan](#).

The review found that despite the commitment to reduce food waste by 33% per capita by 2025, food waste increased “by 2% from 185 kg per person per year in 2013 to 189 kg per person per year in 2021”. In addition, “over 1.037 million tonnes of food were wasted in Scotland in 2021, an increase of 5% from the 2013 baseline”.²⁶

The Scottish Government therefore launched a [consultation on a final Circular Economy and Waste Route Map](#). The consultation paper (PDF) proposed [two priority actions on food waste](#) (pdf):

- Deliver an intervention plan to guide long-term work on household food waste reduction behaviour change (by 2025)
- Develop with stakeholders the most effective way to implement mandatory reporting for food waste and surplus by businesses (by 2025/26).²⁷

The route map is due for publication in 2024. The consultation closed on 15 March 2024.

The Scottish Government has also introduced the [Circular Economy \(Scotland\) Bill](#), which aims to “establish the legislative framework to support Scotland’s transition to a zero waste and circular economy”. The bill would,

²⁵ Gov.uk, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), July 2023

²⁶ Scottish Government, [Review of the 2019 Food Waste Reduction Action Plan](#), 18 January 2024

²⁷ Scottish Government, [Scotland’s circular economy waste route map 2030 consultation](#), 18 January 2024

for example, introduce requirements on “public reporting of food waste and surplus by businesses”.²⁸

For more information on the Bill and food waste policy developments leading up to the bill, see the [Scottish Parliament Information Centre \(SPICe\) briefing on the Circular Economy \(Scotland\) Bill](#) (September 2023).

2.4

Wales

The Welsh Government published its [Beyond Recycling strategy](#) in 2021. This included a target of reducing avoidable food waste by 50% by 2025, relative to a [2007 baseline](#), and a reduction of 60% by 2030.

In May 2023, Wrap Cymru published the [Wales Food Waste Routemap](#), which identified a “suite of interventions” to enable the Welsh Government to meet these targets. The results of WRAP Cymru’s modelling “suggest that Welsh Government’s targeted reduction in food waste of 60% is reachable, but not easy to achieve. This means going beyond current action and taking a proactive approach”.²⁹

2.5

Northern Ireland

A 2021 [consultation document on a Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework](#) stated that Northern Ireland will seek to reduce food waste to meet the SDG 12.3 obligations (a 50% reduction by 2030).

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is consulting on [Rethinking Our Resources: Measures for Climate Action and a Circular Economy in NI](#) until 30 May 2024. DAERA’s proposals include food waste collection proposals, but do not include food waste reduction proposals.

²⁸ Scottish Parliament, [Explanatory Notes to the Circular Economy \(Scotland\) Bill](#), June 2023

²⁹ WRAP Cymru, [Wales Food Waste Routemap](#), 25 May 2023

3 Farming

This chapter focuses on food waste reduction in farming, highlighting why it is difficult to get reliable data.

3.1 Causes of food waste

The National Farmers' Union (NFU) statement on [Where the NFU stands on food waste](#) (September 2023) explained that “the most common causes of food waste at a farm level include retailer standards, cancelled/amended orders, labour shortages, over-production and volatile weather events”.

The environmental charity WWF-UK published a [Hidden Waste Report](#) (October 2022) which summarised some of the key causes and impacts of food waste on farms:

- For meat and animal products, causes include animal disease or injury, milk contamination and damaged eggs.
- For crops that have reached a harvestable state, causes include lack of a market, lack of labour for harvest, or not meeting specifications. Damage, over-ripening or spoiling during transport and storage can also cause food waste.
- For fisheries and aquaculture (fish farming), causes include not catching the correct species, disease and delays in sales/price negotiations causing spoilage.³⁰

The WWF-UK report highlighted that some causes of food waste are beyond the control of farmers:

Previous research has demonstrated that much of the food loss occurring on farms is beyond the control of the farmers, driven by poor system practices and policies. 48% of the food loss which occurs is pre-harvest, i.e. food left on fields, driven by decisions made post farmgate (e.g. standards and specifications) and an inflexible, broken food system. As such, farmers require support and system changes in order to support them in reducing loss rates and their impacts.³¹

³⁰ WWF-UK, [Hidden Waste Report](#), October 2022, page 10

³¹ WWF-UK, [Hidden Waste Report](#), October 2022

In response to a Parliamentary Question on the link between food waste and farm labour, the government stated in January 2023 that a reported 40% of UK farms had experienced food waste because of labour shortage:

There are many causes of food waste on farm including the weather, fluctuations in supply and demand and failure to meet quality specifications. This year the NFU have reported the results of a members' survey which suggests that 40% of UK farms experienced crop waste due to labour shortages. Other than this, the government is not aware of any quantified data linking volumes of waste to specific causes.³²

The government response also explained that unfair practices by businesses purchasing from farmers could lead to increased food waste:

More can be done to reduce food waste in the primary production stage. Conversations with industry have suggested that a potentially significant cause of food waste on farm are unfair business practices at the point of first sale, where unreasonably late cancellations or late specification changes, among others, can lead to produce being left unharvested or rotting in the field.³³

Further information on the impact of retailers on food waste in the supply chain is in section 5.2.

3.2 Measuring food waste

As noted in chapter 1, the complex and numerous causes of food waste in farming mean that it is difficult to measure.

A 2019 report by WRAP on [Food waste in primary production in the UK](#) explained that some of the difficulties of measuring food waste are due to nature and changing consumer demand:

farming is subject to the uncertainties of the natural world. Yields vary from year to year, as well as the quality, size and shape of the product, timing of harvest and other factors. Customer demand also fluctuates, and is itself influenced by many factors. All of these areas of variability are not only potential drivers of waste, but also lead to the robust measurement of waste being difficult, time-consuming and costly.³⁴

WRAP has published [guidance for primary producers to help them meet food waste targets](#) (January 2024), including how to measure waste. The guidance suggested:

- Record measurements of on-farm food surplus and waste on the [Food Waste Reduction Roadmap data capture sheet](#). When it becomes available, do this using WWF's tool.

³² UIN HL4205, [Crops: Waste](#), 9 December 2022 (answered 19 January 2023)

³³ UIN HL4205, [Crops: Waste](#), 9 December 2022 (answered 19 January 2023)

³⁴ WRAP, [Food waste in primary production in the UK](#), 25 July 2019

- Where growers find it helpful, WRAP’s [Grower Guidance and Field Record Sheet](#) can be used to support field measurements.
- Encourage farmers and growers to share their data annually with WRAP.³⁵

3.3

Government and industry action

In August 2023, the UK government published a policy paper on [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#). This set out what the government had done to tackle food and drink waste, including:

- Generally, “support[ing] change through a series of voluntary agreements with food businesses and consumer campaigns since 2007, managed by the Waste and Resources Action Programme”. This included the Courtauld Commitment 2030.
- In relation to unfair business practices, “the government is working with the Waste and Resources Action Programme to address issues across the supply chain. Defra have launched a review into supply chain fairness (in pigs, dairy, eggs and horticulture) to address some of these practices.”³⁶

The National Farmers’ Union has outlined [five ways that farmers and growers reduce food surplus and waste](#):

1. Managing risk by supplying multiple customers, and working with buyers to manage crop flushes/deficits through promotions or specification changes.
2. Unspoilt crops unfit for human consumption are used or sold as animal feed.
3. Many farmers and growers partner with food surplus redistribution charities. Some are able to cover the costs of harvesting and logistics to take produce directly from farms. [...]
4. Using food waste to aid soil nutrition and/or renewable energy production when sent to anaerobic digestion, composted or incinerated for energy recovery.
5. Measuring food waste using WRAP’s ‘Target, Measure, Act’ toolkit.³⁷

³⁵ WRAP, [Primary producers: Actions to support the delivery of the UK Food Waste Reduction Roadmap](#), March 2023

³⁶ Gov.uk, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), July 2023

³⁷ NFU, [Food waste and surplus – essential information](#), 20 March 2024

4 Households

As explained in chapter 1, most of the food waste in the UK is produced by households, whereas waste directly from retail and manufacturing is relatively low.

However, retail and manufacturing practices can have a significant impact on household food waste, for example through packaging and date labelling. In 2016, the British Retail Consortium (BRC) acknowledged these links in a report on [The retail industry's contribution to reducing food waste](#) (PDF), which stated that “whilst most food waste physically happens in the home or in the supply chain, retailers have a shared responsibility for this”.³⁸

Therefore, this chapter looks primarily at households but also includes some actions related to retail and manufacturing.

4.1 Causes of food waste

WRAP annually gathers and reports evidence on attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of UK households through surveys. In March 2023 it published the report [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey 2022: Behaviours, attitudes, and awareness during a cost-of-living crisis](#). These results “cover a period when the UK began to settle into a ‘new normal’ after all Covid-19 restrictions ended in February 2022, followed immediately by an evolving cost-of-living crisis”.³⁹ WRAP noted that “it was another year of adjustment in the daily routines of many UK citizens, including working patterns, feelings of time pressure and eating habits, which all appear to influence food waste”.⁴⁰ The 2022 food waste tracking survey found that despite changes in behavior, such as using leftovers or changing how food was bought, stored and used, reported household food waste continued to increase overall:

Despite rising concerns about the cost-of-living crisis and the number of behaviour changes citizens are taking, there has not – so far at least – been the sharp fall in food waste that happened during the first Covid-19 lockdown.

³⁸ British Retail Consortium, [The retail industry's contribution to reducing food waste](#), autumn 2016

³⁹ WRAP, [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey 2022: Behaviours, attitudes, and awareness during a cost-of-living crisis](#), March 2023

⁴⁰ WRAP, [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey 2022: Behaviours, attitudes, and awareness during a cost-of-living crisis](#), March 2023

In fact, in 2022, the reported level of food waste continued its shallow upward trend that started in the pandemic recovery period.⁴¹

The [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey - Autumn 2023](#) was published in March 2024 and is WRAP's most recent survey. It found mixed views on whether food waste is a key concern for households:

Concern about food waste has also proved remarkably resilient against the backdrop of cost of living; however, it's rarely the top concern (vs. food prices [...]) Overall, over a third (35%) of UK citizens select it in their top five concerns, but almost two in five (38%) don't select it as a food concern at all.⁴²

WRAP also highlighted that households that struggled less with the cost of living generated more food waste:

On average, self-reported levels of food waste continue to be higher in households struggling with the cost of living; yet this group is not solely responsible for the food wasted. Most food waste is still generated by those who are not struggling and have less economic motivation to reduce it. However, the June 2023 food waste uplift in financially better-off groups receded in November 2023.⁴³

The survey identified date labels as an area where improvement is needed, noting that "not all citizens understand the intended meaning of each date label and how they differ from one another. Almost a third (28%) incorrectly identified the meaning of Best Before dates, and likewise, almost half (46%) incorrectly identified the meaning of Use By dates." However, WRAP said that "the survey continues to support that most UK citizens are relying on their own judgement rather than date labels when it comes to disposal decisions".⁴⁴

4.2

Actions to reduce household waste

Defra funds some of WRAP's citizen campaigns such as [Food Waste Action Week](#) and [Love Food Hate Waste](#), which "aim to raise public awareness of food waste and the ways in which we can all reduce it".⁴⁵

WRAP's 2022 report on [Reducing household food waste and plastic packaging](#) identified three actions to help reduce household food waste: sell loose, remove date labels and provide best practice guidance on storage. These actions are further explained below.

⁴¹ WRAP, [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey 2022: Behaviours, attitudes, and awareness during a cost-of-living crisis](#), March 2023

⁴² WRAP, [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey - Autumn 2023](#), March 2024

⁴³ WRAP, [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey - Autumn 2023](#), March 2024

⁴⁴ WRAP, [UK Household Food Waste Tracking Survey - Autumn 2023](#), March 2024

⁴⁵ UIN HL1469, [Food: Waste](#), 24 January 2024

Packaging and selling products loose

WRAP recommended in its 2022 report that fresh produce should be sold loose “unless it can be shown that plastic packaging reduces overall food waste”. This represented a strengthening of position: previously WRAP, Defra and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) [encouraged selling fresh produce loose](#), whereas the 2022 report said that “the [food labelling guidance](#) will be updated and begin with the premise that any item is sold loose”.⁴⁶ WRAP has published [The pathway to selling more uncut fruit and veg loose](#) which sets the target:

By end 2030: 50% of uncut fruit and veg sales volume (units/kgs) in store (10% on-line / 40% in stores currently without weighing capabilities) to be loose.⁴⁷

WRAP has conducted research on the impact of packaging by looking at five types of frequently wasted fresh produce: apples, bananas, broccoli, cucumbers and potatoes. For these items, the research “showed that selling items loose, so that people are able to buy just the right amount of a product to meet their needs (rather than the nearest pack size), is an effective way to reduce household waste”. WRAP estimated that “approximately 60,000 tonnes each of household food waste and CO₂e could be prevented by selling apples, potatoes and bananas loose”.⁴⁸

However, the research also showed that packaging extended the shelf life of bananas at room temperature and broccoli kept at 4°C in the fridge. WRAP noted that the benefits of packaging for bananas were reduced as most UK citizens (63%) removed the packaging from their bananas on return from their shopping trip. For broccoli, WRAP considered that “storage temperature has a much larger impact on shelf life than the presence or absence of packaging”.⁴⁹

An article by the waste company Biffa has described the relationship between packaging and food waste as [the food packaging paradox](#) (September 2023), because the way food is packaged is both preventing and contributing to food waste. Roger Wright, Waste Strategy and Packaging Manager at Biffa explained that “the purpose of packaging is to prevent food waste” and that “transporting perishable and easily damaged items across the globe and the country is a complex logistical process with unique challenges”. In particular, packaging:

- makes the logistical journey possible, helping to store and transport food
- protects the food from both physical damage and atmospheric degradation

⁴⁶ WRAP, [Reducing household food waste and plastic packaging](#), February 2022, page 8

⁴⁷ WRAP, [The pathway to selling more uncut fruit and veg loose](#), March 2023

⁴⁸ WRAP, [Reducing household food waste and plastic packaging](#), February 2022, pages 8-11

⁴⁹ WRAP, [Reducing household food waste and plastic packaging](#), February 2022, page 12

- provides information on ingredients, allergens, nutrition and what to do with the packaging after use
- helps to promote food products to consumers through branding and on pack messaging. This is especially true for fresh produce prone to atmospheric degradation, such as animal products like meat and cheeses.⁵⁰

The article suggested “if not loose, then reduce”, meaning that when packaging is required for hygiene and safety, “reduction options” should be explored. Biffa also highlighted that consumer acceptance was important, using an example from early 2023:

Sainsburys launched vacuum-packed mince which [removed] a plastic tray. This reduced the amount of plastic in each product by 55%, saving 450 tonnes of plastic annually. While this was a sustainable success story, consumer response on social media was mixed due to the new presentation of the meat.⁵¹

Date labelling

Guidance from the FSA explains [the difference between “use by” and “best before” dates](#) on food:

A use-by date on food is about safety. This is the most important date to remember. Never eat food after the use-by date, even if it looks and smells ok, as it could make you very ill. [...] You will see use-by dates on food that goes off quickly, such as meat products or ready-to-eat salads.

[...] The best before date, sometimes shown as BBE (best before end), is about quality and not safety. After the best before date listed on a product, the food will be safe to eat but may not be at its best. [...]⁵²

In both cases, food must be stored according to instructions for the dates to be valid.

Consumers are not always aware of the differences between “use by” and “best before” dates. For example, research commissioned by WRAP on dairy products in 2023 found that some food waste was caused by “people using date labels in a way that they are not intended to be used e.g., using a ‘Best-Before’ date as a ‘disposal date’ for a product”.⁵³

WRAP’s [guidance on labelling](#) suggests:

Remove Best before dates on fresh produce, where appropriate, to encourage consumers to use their judgment on when to eat fresh produce, avoiding waste.

⁵⁰ Biffa, [The Food Packaging Paradox](#), 26 September 2023

⁵¹ Biffa, [The Food Packaging Paradox](#), 26 September 2023

⁵² Food Standards Agency, [Best before and use-by dates](#), accessed 11 April 2024

⁵³ WRAP, [Citizen insights on 'Use By' and 'Best Before' dates on dairy products](#), February 2023

Coded date labels to help in-store colleagues to manage stock rotation [...] should not be easily understandable for the general public.⁵⁴

Many of the UK's largest supermarkets have removed "best before" dates from fresh produce, including:

- In 2018, Tesco, which has the largest share of the groceries market in Great Britain,⁵⁵ began to "remove 'Best Before' consumption guidance dates off nearly 70 fruit and vegetable lines".⁵⁶ Tesco announced in April 2023 that it would "switch from 'Use By' to 'Best Before' dates on more than 30 yogurt lines in its latest move to help its customers reduce their food waste".⁵⁷
- Asda announced that from September 2022 it would remove "best before" dates on almost 250 fresh fruit and vegetable items in all its UK stores.⁵⁸
- In December 2022, Morrisons said it would be "scrapping date labels and removing 'Display Until' messaging on nearly 200 of its fresh fruit, vegetable and salad items". In addition, for perishable pre-packed products such as berries, grapes and stone fruit, it would move away from 'Display Until' and introduce 'Best Before' labelling.⁵⁹
- In September 2023, Sainsbury's announced that it would "be swapping use-by dates for best-before dates across its own-brand milk range". This followed its decision in 2022 "to move from use-by dates to best-before dates on its own-brand yoghurts [...], as well as removing best-before dates entirely from over 1,500 products including fresh produce lines such as, pineapples, pumpkins, and apples".⁶⁰

Storage

In its 2022 report on [Reducing household food waste and plastic packaging](#), which mainly looked at five types of fresh produce, WRAP recommended providing best practice guidance on storage and helping people to "understand the benefits of storing appropriate fresh-produce in the fridge, set at the right temperature".⁶¹

⁵⁴ WRAP, [WRAP Food labelling guidance 2023 UNCUT FRESH](#), August 2023

⁵⁵ Kantar Worldpanel, [Grocery Market Share](#), accessed 11 April 2024

⁵⁶ Tesco plc, [Tesco Best Before](#), 21 May 2018

⁵⁷ Tesco plc, [Tesco changes yogurt labelling to cut down on food waste](#), 24 April 2023

⁵⁸ Asda, [Asda announces major change to help customers reduce food waste and save money](#), 24 August 2022

⁵⁹ Morrisons, [Morrisons scraps dates on its fresh fruit and veg to help customers reduce waste and save money this Christmas](#), 8 December 2022

⁶⁰ Sainsbury's, [Spoiler alert: Sainsbury's switches from use-by to best-before date on milk range to reduce household food waste](#), 7 September 2023

⁶¹ WRAP, [Reducing household food waste and plastic packaging](#), February 2022

WRAP's 2023 guidance on [Food labelling](#) also recommended that “home storage guidance to store at below 5°C should be provided for all fresh fruit and vegetables, whether sold loose or packaged”, apart from bananas, onions, pineapple and some herbs.

4.3

Progress

WRAP's [Retail Survey 2021-22](#) (published November 2022) found that “excellent progress” had been made by the major retailers, particularly in relation to date labels and storage advice, on own-brand packaged food products. However, there were some areas for improvement, including:

- use of “best before” date labels on dairy produce
- removal of date labels on fresh produce (particularly “display until” labels)
- more accurate use of “open life statements” on dairy, meat and bagged salads (open life statements show how long the food can be kept for once opened)
- use of the fridge logo and numerical temperature statements across all fresh produce and chilled products
- better use of the snowflake logo on the front and back of pack (to indicate suitability for home freezing).⁶²

⁶² WRAP, [Retail Survey 21-22](#), November 2022

5 Retail and manufacturing

This chapter focuses on some of food waste challenges related to retail and manufacturing that do not directly impact household food waste. For retail and manufacturing practices that impact household food waste, such as packaging and date labels, see the previous chapter.

5.1 Mandatory food waste reporting

The environmental campaign group Feedback has called for better data on food waste in supply chains because:

Tracking the effectiveness of supermarket action on food waste requires accurate and transparent data. Transparent data is important as it enables citizens, business and policy-makers to compare the best and worst performing retailers. Transparency also enables government, social entrepreneurs and charities to create data driven solutions.⁶³

Feedback highlighted that “Tesco’s decision to publish their food waste data led to a massive increase in donations due to public and corporate awareness of the level of waste”. Feedback called for data to be “independently audited” and “made available publicly in an accessible format”, including information on:

- Waste occurring at all stages of the supply chain, from the farm up until the point of sale;
- Type of food being wasted;
- Quantities of different types of wasted food;
- Stage in the supply chain where waste occurs;
- Action taken to cause or avoid food waste;
- For fresh produce, the cosmetic specifications applied to the crop;
- Progress since last reporting;
- Trading practices adopted that have an influence on food waste;

⁶³ Feedback, [Supermarket-scorecard](#), June 2018

- Data on how much food is sent to AD [anaerobic digestion] and the type of food sent i.e., avoidable vs. unavoidable waste and edible vs. inedible.⁶⁴

In 2017, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee also recommended that the government “requires food businesses over a particular size to publicly report data on food waste”.⁶⁵

On 13 June 2022 the [government food strategy](#) announced the launch of a consultation on [Improved food waste reporting by large food businesses in England](#).

The [government response](#) (PDF) to the consultation was published in July 2023. It acknowledged that “the voluntary approach to food waste reporting has been broadly successful to date with almost half of large food businesses in England measuring and reporting voluntarily in 2022” but that “the number of businesses voluntarily reporting food waste has stalled and is expected to plateau”.

Overall, there was support for a regulatory approach to food waste reporting for large food businesses in England. The government response said:

We recognise and welcome that 99% of respondents (80% when removing campaign responses) were in support of Option 2, a regulatory approach to food waste reporting for large food businesses in England being considered by the government. We recognise that those respondents were in support of Option 2 because they consider a regulatory approach to lead to an increase in the number of businesses reporting and reducing food waste, levelling the playing field and bringing financial savings for business and environmental benefits, including minimising the resources used to producing food and reducing greenhouse gas emissions from waste management.⁶⁶

However, the government response also noted that “only 39% of respondents to the consultation identified as a large business”, meaning that “most of those responding would not be required to measure and report food waste themselves”.⁶⁷ In December 2023, the government clarified that “46 respondents to the consultation on Improved food waste reporting were large businesses. 30 large businesses (65%) were in favour of introducing mandatory food waste reporting for large businesses”.⁶⁸ Defra stated in September 2022 that a total of 3,852 consultation responses were received.⁶⁹

In addition, the government was concerned about the costs of mandatory reporting, both for businesses and for the public sector in having to introduce

⁶⁴ Feedback, [Supermarket-scorecard](#), June 2018

⁶⁵ Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, [Food waste in England](#), HC 429, 30 April 2017

⁶⁶ Gov.uk, [Improved food waste reporting by large food businesses in England](#), July 2023, updated November 2023

⁶⁷ Gov.uk, [Improved food waste reporting by large food businesses in England](#), July 2023, updated November 2023

⁶⁸ UIN 5090, [Waste Management: Business](#), 4 December 2023, answered 11 December 2023

⁶⁹ Defra, [Consultation on improved reporting of food waste by large food businesses in England](#), September 2022

regulation. The government concluded that a regulatory approach was not suitable and that a voluntary approach would remain:

After careful consideration of the responses to the consultation the government has decided that a regulatory approach is not suitable at this time, especially when any additional costs may be passed on to consumers. The government will instead be looking at options to improve the number of food businesses reporting through a voluntary approach. The voluntary approach will remain in place until mid-2025 at a minimum at which point a review will be undertaken. Subsequently, and in order to provide businesses with the certainty they need, any changes to this approach will be made after a minimum of 12 months following that review in mid-2025 or later.⁷⁰

In September 2023, the campaign group Feedback [launched legal action against the government](#), stating that the government response did not reflect the evidence received:

The legality of the consultation is being challenged on grounds that the government's decision is not based on a reasonable or rational view of the evidence it received. The decision is also based on an inadequate impact assessment, ignores advice from the government's own experts, the Climate Change Committee, and fails to take into account the emissions savings that would result from making food waste reporting mandatory.⁷¹

In November 2023, the government published an update saying that the government response to the consultation had been “withdrawn” and that “the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will reconsider whether there should be mandatory food waste reporting in the future”.⁷²

In [response to a PQ](#), the government stated on 19 February 2024 that it would be gathering further evidence:

The Secretary of State decided in November 2023 to look again at how best to secure the benefits of food waste reporting for large businesses. We now intend to gather further evidence and re-consider all options in the 2022 consultation, including mandatory reporting, using the latest available data. We expect to make the decision later this year.

Medium sized businesses (MSBs) are not under consideration for mandatory reporting approach. MSBs are supported to report voluntarily, including through the *Food Waste Reduction Roadmap* and the *Guardians of Grub* programme, which provide guidance to businesses of all sizes on tackling food waste.⁷³

On 26 February 2024, The Grocer magazine reported that [Defra had launched a new consultation on mandatory reporting](#):

⁷⁰ Gov.uk, [Improved food waste reporting by large food businesses in England](#), July 2023, updated November 2023

⁷¹ Feedback, [Defra faces threat of legal action over its u-turn on food waste law](#), 14 September 2023

⁷² Gov.uk, [Improved food waste reporting by large food businesses in England](#), July 2023, updated November 2023

⁷³ UIN 13661, [Food: Waste](#), 7 February 2024, answered on 19 February 2024; see also UIN 17907, [Food: Waste](#), 11 March 2024, answered 19 March 2024

Defra has launched a new consultation with large food companies and hospitality businesses over plans to introduce mandatory reporting on food waste.

In it, the government calls for “additional evidence” on the potential cost implications of introducing measuring and reporting.

The move follows the announcement in November by environment secretary Steve Barclay that he was considering a u-turn on Thérèse Coffey’s controversial decision to scrap the plans, despite them having been first promised by Michael Gove in 2018.

There is no further information about the consultation on either the government or WRAP websites. An article by Catering Insight, [Defra calls for industry's view on food waste reporting](#) (12 February 2024), indicated that the consultation was via a Microsoft Forms questionnaire sent to industry, which has since closed.

5.2 Impact of retailers on supply chains

Feedback’s 2018 [Supermarket-scorecard](#) (PDF) highlighted that although retail food waste is a low proportion of the UK total, “these figures fail to reflect [...] the ways in which supermarkets’ trading practices drive waste in their supply chains”.⁷⁴ Feedback highlighted that some trading practices would be deemed unfair under [the Groceries Supply Code of Practice \(GSCOP\)](#) whereas others wouldn’t be:

Our research and investigations in supply chains, both in the UK and around the world, have consistently shown that supermarkets’ business practices drive waste (Colbert 2017, Bowman 2018). Trading practices, including order cancellations, last minute changes to forecasts, retrospective changes to supply agreements and the use of cosmetic specifications to reject produce, all cause food to be wasted. Some of these trading practices are deemed to be unfair under the Groceries Supply Code of Practice (2009), while some practices not technically classed as unfair trading still cause waste.

An example is cosmetic specifications; the standards supermarkets use to grade produce and reject produce that does not meet requirements. Cosmetic specifications in themselves, while a major cause of food waste, do not constitute unfair trading. However, the inconsistent use of cosmetic specifications as a front for rejecting produce which has been ordered but is no longer wanted, does constitute unfair trading practice, as our research has highlighted.⁷⁵

For more information on the GSCOP and how it impacts farmers, see the Library briefing on a [Debate on an e-petition to reform the Groceries Supply Code of Practice to better protect farmers](#) (January 2024).

⁷⁴ Feedback, [Supermarket-scorecard](#), June 2018

⁷⁵ Feedback, [Supermarket-scorecard](#), June 2018

The government has acknowledged that [primary agricultural producers are particularly vulnerable to unfair trading practices](#) and has started using powers under [Section 29 of the Agriculture Act 2020](#). Section 29 allows the government to impose fair dealing obligations on business purchases of agricultural products.

[Written evidence from Dr Carrie Bradshaw](#), University of Leeds, to the Public Accounts Committee's 2023 inquiry on [The Government's resources and waste reforms for England](#) highlighted that:

These 'fair dealing powers', now contained in the Agriculture Act 2020, were described in the [Resources and Waste] Strategy as being sought 'to protect producers from exposure to unfair practices which are often the cause of viable produce going to waste'.

Evidence suggests measures of these kind have the potential to reduce waste in primary production and manufacturing. However, concerns have been raised that due to the design of the powers, the role of retailers in driving food waste would not be legally addressed, and that their purpose was to support the redistribution, rather than reduction, of farm-level surplus.

[...] There have been consultations on the use of the powers. However, the Government did not invite views on, or propose how, the powers could be used to reduce food waste. Arguably, the status of any regulations under these powers as a food waste intervention is thus unclear.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Dr Carrie Bradshaw, [written evidence to the Public Accounts Committee](#), August 2023

6 Hospitality and food service

6.1 Causes of food waste

[Guardians of Grub](#) is WRAP's food waste reduction campaign to tackle the £3 billion of food thrown away at hospitality and food service (HaFS) outlets. It explains that “on average, 18% of the food purchased by the UK Hospitality and Food Service sector is being thrown away,” and that this costs the industry £3.2 billion a year. Almost half of the food waste (45%) comes from food preparation, a third (34%) from consumer plates and a fifth (21%) from spoilage (damaged or out of date food).⁷⁷

The [campaign encourages businesses to take actions](#) including:

- Purchasing and ordering: design a smart menu using fewer ingredients; use core items across the menu; check use-by dates and rotate stock; work with suppliers to arrange just-in-time deliveries; consider buying portions ready-made for menu items; and bulk buy if it fits with demand or if items are non-perishable.
- Storage: label items with purchase and use-by dates; consider vacuum packing some items to extend shelf life; consider using frozen, dried, bottled or tinned goods as alternatives to fresh ingredients where quality is comparable; and revise the shelf/storage plan frequently to ensure that it reflects the menu.
- Preparation: avoid excess trimming of fish, meat and vegetables; consider offering vegetables with their skins on; freeze any surplus or use the next day; use trimmings to make other dishes; use scales to measure ingredients and portions; and donate surplus food to redistribution organisations.
- Portion size: keep portion sizes consistent – use standard spoons and measures; offer the same menu item in different portion sizes; offer average portions of vegetables, with top-ups if needed; offer to leave out any of the ingredients where possible, for example no salad; salad without onions; introduce takeaway containers such as ‘doggy boxes’ for leftovers and monitor plate waste using tracking sheets.⁷⁸

WRAP’s [Hospitality and food service sector action plan](#) (June 2021) includes additional actions for the sector on measuring food waste, engaging staff,

⁷⁷ Guardians of Grub, [Menu planning guide](#), accessed April 2024

⁷⁸ Guardians of Grub, [Summary Checklist](#), accessed April 2024

working with suppliers, engaging consumers and redistribution of surplus food.

6.2 Government action

The government's August 2023 policy paper on [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#) said that in 2021, the government established the [Hospitality Sector Council](#) which was set up to co-create ideas and solutions with the hospitality sector to support the delivery of the [Hospitality Strategy](#). This includes working with the Council to repurpose, reuse and divert food waste; support the sector to minimise use of single use items and packaging; and promoting and supporting innovative wetland systems for breweries to reduce water waste.⁷⁹

Public procurement

Some HaFS outlets are publicly funded, such as school, hospital and prison catering outlets. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) leads on public sector food and catering policies across government.

The [Government Buying Standards for Food and Catering Services \(GBSF\)](#) sets out standards for public sector organisations to apply when procuring food and catering services. These standards relate to food production, processing and distribution, nutrition, resource efficiency, and socio-economic considerations. Some of the standards are mandatory, and some are best practice. The mandatory standards for food waste say that:

Food and catering supplier with off-site meal preparation operations shall provide evidence of a systematic approach to managing and minimising the impacts of waste throughout their direct operations, that is, those operations over which they have direct financial and/or operational control. This shall include evidence of a continual improvement cycle of objective setting, measurement, analysis, review and the implementation of improvements actions.

Catering service suppliers which will supply on-site catering services shall:

- take steps to minimise food waste in their onsite operations by creating a food waste minimisation plan, describing what actions they will undertake
- review and revise the actions they are taking with suitable regularity so as to continue to reduce food waste wherever possible; and
- feed back to clients on progress and results with suitable regularity

⁷⁹ Gov.uk, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), July 2023

The contracting authority shall check whether a separate food waste collection service can be provided. If the service can be provided, while achieving value for money, then it shall meet the best practice standard.⁸⁰

The best practise standards in the GBSF include the additional suggested standards:

The food waste minimisation plan includes actions and estimated quantifiable reductions.

The supplier ensures that appropriate training is given to staff to ensure best practice in terms of food waste minimisation.

Surplus food that is fit for consumption is distributed for consumption rather than sent for disposal as waste, for example gifted to charities / food banks.⁸¹

In 2022, Defra consulted on [Proposed public sector food and catering policy for England](#) (PDF). The consultation document explained that the mandatory standards mean that “Caterers must provide evidence of a ‘Target, Measure, Act’ approach to managing and minimising the impacts of waste, as described in The Waste and Resources Action Programme’s (WRAP) Food Waste Reduction Toolkit.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Defra, [Government Buying Standard for food and catering services](#), updated August 2021

⁸¹ Defra, [Government Buying Standard for food and catering services](#), updated August 2021

⁸² Defra, [Proposed public sector food and catering policy for England](#), June 2022, page 24

7

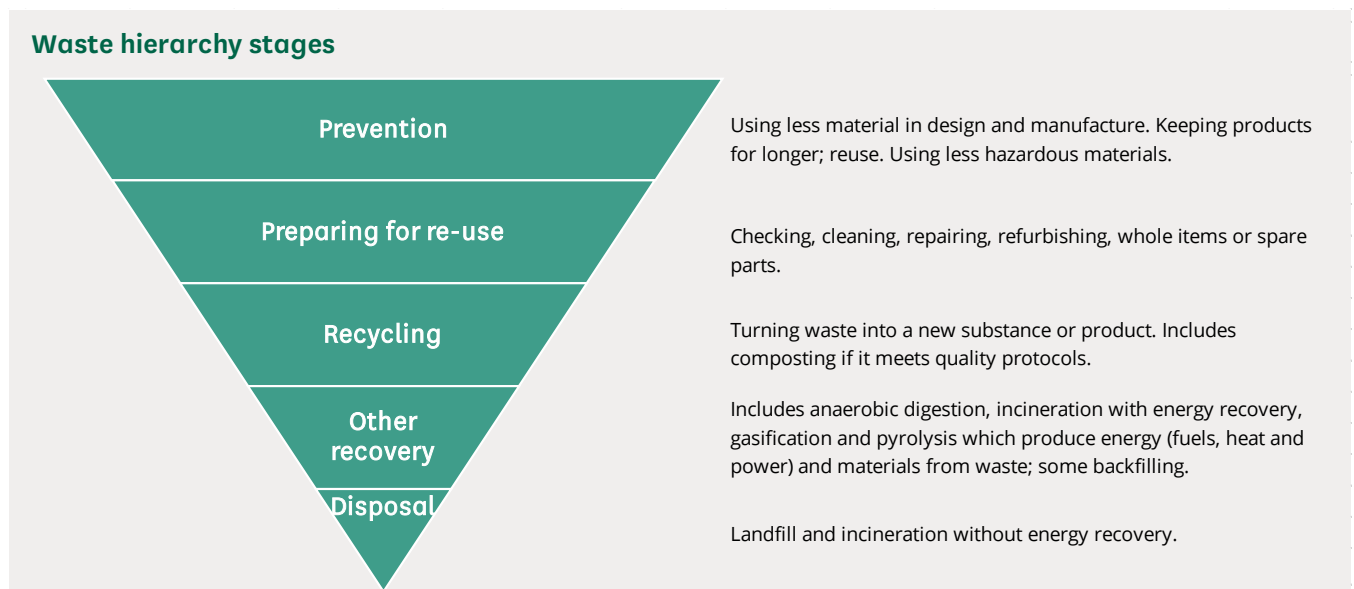
Disposal and collection of food waste

Waste is a devolved matter. As such there are different rules relating to the disposal and collection of food waste across the different parts of the UK.

7.1

The waste hierarchy

Across the UK the law requires the use of a waste hierarchy in waste management. The hierarchy sets out the order of priority for waste management options.⁸³ It applies, generally, to any business or organisation that produces, handles, treats, or disposes of waste items. The waste hierarchy is depicted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), as follows:⁸⁴



The waste hierarchy was originally a requirement stemming from EU law.⁸⁵ It is implemented in the UK through:

- Regulation 12 and schedule 1 of [The Waste \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2011](#) (SI no.988);
- Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 9 to the [Environmental Permitting \(England and Wales\) Regulations 2016](#) (SI no.1154);

⁸³ EU Waste Framework Directive, Article 4

⁸⁴ Defra, [Guidance on applying the Waste Hierarchy](#), June 2011

⁸⁵ EU waste framework directive ([Directive 2008/98/EC](#))

- The [Waste \(Scotland\) Regulations 2012](#) (SI no.148);
- The [Waste Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2011](#) (SI no.127)

The UK Government has published [Statutory guidance, Food and drink waste hierarchy: deal with surplus and waste](#), updated 1 January 2024. The guidance is for any business or organisation which produces, handles, treats, or disposes of surplus or waste food and drink. It provides further information about how these organisations should apply the hierarchy to any food and drink surplus resulting from their activities.

The UK Government has said that its preference is for food waste to be collected for treatment by anaerobic digestion, which “presents the best environmental outcome for the treatment of unavoidable food waste, due to the generation of bio-fuel and digestate.” The resulting digestate material from the process can be spread to land, which helps ensure that nutrients are recycled.⁸⁶

Disposal to landfill

In the waste management hierarchy, disposal to landfill is considered the least desirable option. Across the UK, there are a range of existing and proposed restrictions on sending food waste to landfill across the UK.

England

In its [Net Zero Strategy](#) (2021), the UK Government gave a commitment to “explore options for the near elimination of biodegradable municipal waste to landfill from 2028.” A consultation on this issue was published in May 2023, [Near elimination of biodegradable waste to landfill](#). The consultation has closed but a government response has not yet been published.

Wales

The [Prohibition on the Incineration, or the Deposit in Landfill, of Specified Waste \(Wales\) Regulations 2023](#) have banned specified separately collected recyclable materials (including food waste) from non-domestic and domestic premises from going to incineration and landfill, from 6 April 2024.

Scotland

The Scottish Government intends to ban all biodegradable waste (including food waste) going to landfill by 2025. Provision for this had been made in regulation 11 of the [Landfill \(Scotland\) Regulations 2003](#), as amended, but it has not yet come into force.

⁸⁶ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

Northern Ireland

The [Food Waste Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#) prohibit food waste that has been separately collected from being sent to landfill (for more on separation requirements see the next section).

7.2 Food waste collections

As waste is devolved there are different requirements for households and businesses in respect of food waste collection throughout the UK.

England

There are currently no mandatory requirements for local authorities in England to collect food waste from households, although many do offer this service.

Future changes to household and business food waste collection

To improve recycling rates, the UK Government will require all local authorities in England to collect the same recyclable waste streams for recycling or composting from households and non-household municipal premises (such as businesses, schools and hospitals).

The recyclable waste streams will include food waste, as well as paper and card, plastic, glass, metal. An optional garden waste collection will be offered to all households, and councils will be able to choose to co-collect (in the same bin) food and garden waste if preferred.⁸⁷ Food waste will include the following:

- all food intended for human or household pet consumption, regardless of whether it has any nutritional value
- biodegradable material resulting from the processing or preparation of food, including inedible food parts such as bones, eggshells, fruit and vegetable skins, tea bags and coffee grounds⁸⁸

Local authorities (in their capacity as waste collection authorities) will be required to offer a weekly collection of food waste from households. All non-household municipal premises in England will have to arrange for the separate collection of food waste, but they will not be required to have weekly collections.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

⁸⁸ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

⁸⁹ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

The new rules are expected to apply in most local authorities from 31 March 2026 for households and from 31 March 2025 for non-household municipal premises.⁹⁰

Some local authorities have long-term waste disposal contracts which may present a barrier to introducing separate food waste collections. The government has said that there could be a longer implementation period for these authorities.⁹¹

Section 57 of the [Environment Act 2021](#) provides the legal framework to introduce these requirements by inserting a new section 45A into the [Environmental Protection Act 1990](#).

Wales

All local authorities in Wales provide a household weekly food waste recycling service.⁹²

The Welsh Government has introduced legislation, the [Waste Separation Requirements \(Wales\) Regulations 2023](#) (SI 2023/1290) which, from 6 April 2024, has required all workplaces (businesses, the public and third sector) that produce more than 5 kilograms of food waste a week (roughly equivalent to a full domestic kitchen caddy), to have a separate food waste collection.

In December 2023 the Welsh Government published a [Separate Collection of Waste Materials for Recycling: A Code of Practice for Wales](#) to accompany the new rules, which contains further guidance on food waste.

Scotland

The Scottish Government states that 80% of households in Scotland have access to food recycling collections.⁹³

The [Waste \(Scotland\) Regulations 2012](#) (SI 2012/148) initially required all food businesses in non-rural areas generating more than 50 kilograms of food waste to segregate their food waste for separate collection. In 2016 this was extended to those generating more than 5 kilograms.

For further information see Scottish Environment Protection Agency, [Recycling \(including food waste\)](#).

⁹⁰ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

⁹¹ HM Government, [Consistency in household and business recycling in England Consultation outcome Government response](#), Updated 21 November 2023

⁹² Wales Recycles, [How can recycled food waste create energy?](#) (accessed 27 February 2024)

⁹³ Scottish Government, [Review of the 2019 Food Waste Reduction Action Plan](#), January 2024, p10

Northern Ireland

All councils in Northern Ireland offer a household food waste collection.⁹⁴ The [Food Waste Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#) placed a new section 20A into the [Waste and Contaminated Land \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1997](#) to require that each council “take such steps as the council considers reasonable to promote separate collection of food waste”. It requires councils to:

...arrange for there to be provided to the occupier of every domestic property in its area—

- (a) a receptacle which enables the separate collection of food waste from the property; or
- (b) where a district council is satisfied that the amount of food waste that will be collected is not substantially less than would be collected in a receptacle provided under paragraph (a), a receptacle which enables the occupier to present food waste and other bio-waste for separate collection.⁹⁵

The [Food Waste Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#) also place a duty on food businesses (businesses involved in food preparation or the sale of food), which produce in excess of 5 kilograms of food waste per week, to present food waste for separate collection.⁹⁶

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs published [Guidance for businesses on the Food Waste Regulations \(NI\) 2015](#), which provides further information.

⁹⁴ NI Direct, [Bins and waste collection](#) (accessed 28 February 2024)

⁹⁵ Section 20A(3) [Waste and Contaminated Land \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1997](#)

⁹⁶ [Explanatory memorandum to the Food Waste Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2015](#) (PDF)

8 Food surplus and redistribution

As outlined above, the waste hierarchy prioritises prevention, that is, preventing food waste at source. Second on the waste hierarchy is re-use. By redistributing surplus food, businesses can reduce the amount of food that ends up as waste.

8.1 Food redistribution statistics

WRAP's [Annual survey of redistribution organisations in the UK](#) estimated that the amount of redistributed surplus food totalled almost 170,000 tonnes in 2022. This is an increase of 133% from around 54,000 in 2019.⁹⁷

82% of the 2022 total was sourced from retail and manufacture, 10% from the hospitality and food sector and 5% from the farm sector. Of this, 70% was redistributed through charitable channels and 30% through commercial channels. The total equates to food worth approximately £590 million, corresponding to nearly 404 million meals.⁹⁸

Food surplus diverted to animal feed in 2015 was 2.7 Mt.

8.2 The food redistribution sector

WRAP has a [database of food redistribution organisations in the UK](#). This includes FareShare, which is “the UK's largest food redistribution charity, taking edible surplus food from more than 500 businesses, including major retailers, manufacturers, farmers and growers and redistributing it to vulnerable people through a UK-wide network of almost 11,000 frontline charities”.⁹⁹ The database also includes some organisations that operate in locally.

Food redistribution organisations include food banks, such as those operated by the [Trussell Trust](#) and the [Independent Food Aid Network \(IFAN\)](#). For more information on food banks, see the Library briefing [Food Banks in the UK](#) (October 2023).

⁹⁷ WRAP's [Annual survey of redistribution organisations in the UK](#), September 2023

⁹⁸ WRAP, [Food Surplus and Waste in the UK Key Facts](#), November 2023

⁹⁹ WRAP, [Redistribution](#), accessed 11 April 2024

While the increase in food redistribution has prevented food waste, there has been some debate about whether there is too much competition in the food redistribution sector. In February 2024, the FareShare CEO George Wright said that “[There’s too much competitive behaviour](#) amongst the charities when they should be working better to make better use of their collective resources”. He also stated that “the current competitive regime in the UK is less efficient and can result in volume being moved from one type of charity to another – that’s a really bad outcome for the end beneficiaries”.¹⁰⁰

The Food Foundation has also described a “[food waste redistribution conundrum](#)”:

Redistributing surplus food rather than sending to landfill has both environmental and social positives and in the short-term food redistribution can provide immediate relief to those experiencing food poverty - experienced by 13.7 million people in the UK. Many UK retailers have policies in place to redistribute food waste to foodbanks, schools and other charities, typically indirectly through organisations such as FareShare.

However, food surplus charities and food banks are not a long-term, sustainable solution to the problem of food poverty. This requires action on the root causes of food poverty and policy solutions to address these causes, such as low incomes and the relative cost of healthy food. Retailer redistribution of food surplus is also criticised as a means through which companies can demonstrate CSR [corporate social responsibility] while avoiding being held accountable for tackling the structural problems that cause food waste in first place.¹⁰¹

8.3 Government funding

Defra provided £15 million towards the [Resource Action Fund](#), a pilot fund available for 2019 to 2020 to support the redistribution of surplus food and reduce waste. The fund, which totalled £18 million, was delivered by WRAP and included a programme of grants to provide small- and large-scale capital infrastructure and revenue support to organisations redistributing surplus food from the likes of retailers and food manufacturers.¹⁰²

In April 2020, Defra provided [further funding to support economically vulnerable people](#) during the Covid-19 pandemic:

In April 2020, Defra secured funding, via a DCMS managed scheme for the voluntary and charity sectors, to support the distribution of grants worth £16m to front line charities who were best placed to respond to the immediate needs

¹⁰⁰ The Grocer, [FareShare boss calls for greater co-operation among charities in fight against hunger](#), 11 January 2024

¹⁰¹ Food Foundation, [Food Waste report](#), February 2024

¹⁰² Gov.uk, [The waste prevention programme for England: Maximising Resources, Minimising Waste](#), July 2023

of economically vulnerable people. The majority of this funding was provided to FareShare.

In November 2020, building on the support given to the most vulnerable during the initial months of the pandemic, the Government announced a winter support package of interventions to support the economically vulnerable. The winter package included a further £16m of funding for Defra to support food charities with the purchasing and distribution of food to the vulnerable over a 16-week period starting from the beginning of December. This funding stream is being managed by the food redistributor FareShare.¹⁰³

Additional funding was provided as an “emergency food surplus grant:

In April 2020, through the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), Defra launched a series of grant opportunities to support the redistribution of surplus food to those most in need. Defra made £3.25m available for this Covid-19 emergency grant. The primary focus of the fund is to enable not-for-profit organisations both large and small to overcome barriers to the distribution of surplus food that would otherwise be wasted in the wake of Covid-19.¹⁰⁴

FareShare and other charities have since [campaigned for the government to commit £25 million a year](#) to help deliver the equivalent of 100 million meals “to the people worst hit by the UK’s cost of living crisis”.¹⁰⁵ In December 2022, FareShare explained to the EFRA Committee why more funding was necessary:

FareShare is asking for £25 million a year in support, which would make it cost neutral for farmers, growers and producers to pick, package and transport their surplus food, instead of it going to waste or other destinations.

By doing this, the government could deliver 42,500 tonnes of surplus food, the equivalent of 100 million meals, to people worst hit by the cost of living crisis. It would save the government £140 million in costs avoided, and will prevent the wasteful emissions of nearly 70,000 tonnes of CO₂e.¹⁰⁶

In February 2024, [the Prime Minister announced that there would be £15 million](#) made available “to redirect [food] surplus into the hands of those who need it”.¹⁰⁷ This was welcomed by FareShare and its partners.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ UIN 153134, [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: Coronavirus](#), 26 February 2021

¹⁰⁴ UIN 153134, [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: Coronavirus](#), 26 February 2021

¹⁰⁵ FareShare, [1,000 charities back FareShare's call for the Government to tackle food insecurity](#), 2 March 2023

¹⁰⁶ FareShare, [written evidence to the EFRA Committee](#), December 2022

¹⁰⁷ Gov.uk, [Prime Minister's speech to the NFU annual conference](#), 20 February 2024

¹⁰⁸ FareShare, [PM Announces £15M Fund For Food Surplus Redistribution](#), 20 February 2024

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