

SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT DO MORE TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE?

BACKGROUND



A total of 9.5 million tonnes of food is thrown out each year in the UK. That food is chucked from households, restaurants, catering companies and food manufacturers. Most of the waste comes from our homes – and some of the foods we bin the most are fruit and vegetables, bread and leftovers.

The amount of food we chuck has a total value of more than £19 billion, and is responsible for 25 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, which

are causing global warming.

Each year, the average UK household throws away hundreds of pounds' worth of food. Younger adults seem to be more responsible for the waste than older generations: research carried out last year showed that 80% of adults aged 18–34 admit to throwing out uneaten food each week, compared to 47% of people aged over 55.

So what can be done about it? We can all take steps as individuals to make sure we only buy what we need, re-use scraps of food and plan meals carefully. But some food waste campaigners argue that bigger action is needed – and urgently. Currently, there is no law forcing supermarkets or restaurants to donate unused food to charity.

In February 2016, France became the first country in the world to ban supermarkets from throwing away unused food. Stores are now forced to donate their unwanted food to charities and food banks. This was a law passed by French politicians, who insisted that supermarkets would face a fine if they didn't obey.

Here, no such law exists. Supermarkets are getting a lot of criticism for not doing more to combat food waste. Most of the big supermarket chains in the UK do give food away to charities and **food banks** – but



campaigners say they should be donating much more. Last year, all the major supermarket companies such as Tesco, Waitrose and ASDA signed a pledge to halve food waste by 2030. This followed the Government's decision to appoint a Food Surplus and Waste Champion, who has called on nearly 300 organisations to pledge to cut food waste. But this is voluntary; no company is forced to cut their waste by law.

Then there's the issue of hunger. While millions of tonnes of food are being chucked in the bin, millions of people in the UK don't get enough food. More people than ever are being forced to use food banks, according to the country's biggest food bank provider, the Trussell Trust.

Is it time the Government took some major action to reduce the UK's food waste problem?

DEFINITION

Food banks – These are places where people who are at risk of going hungry are given essential food supplies. But you cannot just turn up off the street and walk away with food – you must be referred by professionals such as doctors, social workers or the police. They give individuals a voucher that is presented at the food bank centre in exchange for three days of “emergency food”, most of which is donated by individuals, schools, churches and businesses. Recently, food bank use has soared. In 2010, 41,000 people used one, but today the figure is closer to 1.6 million.



FACTS & FIGURES



Around the world, **one-third** of all the food produced is thrown away, according to the United Nations.

One in every five bags of shopping is thrown out in the UK.

6.5 million tonnes of food is wasted in UK households every year.

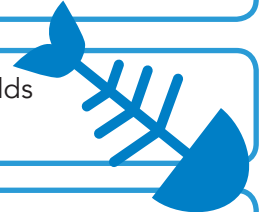
860,000 apples are chucked out every single day in the UK.

A UK household throws away an average of **170** potatoes each year.



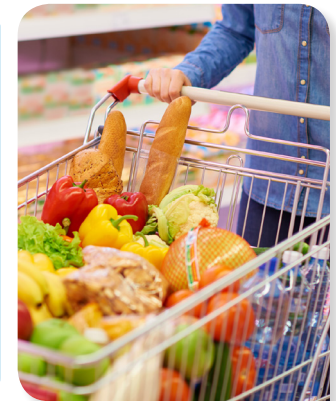
A record **823,145** food parcels were given out at food banks between April and September 2019. 301,653 parcels went to children.

One in every 50 UK households used a food bank in 2018-19.



At least **three million** food parcels were given out during 2019.

Sainsbury's planned to spend **£10 million** on reducing food waste in the UK through its 'Waste Less, Save More' scheme, launched in 2015. It was scrapped two years later after just **£1 million** of spending.



The good news: between 2007 and 2012, the total amount of household food waste in the UK fell by **15%**.

More good news: we're saving just under **£5 billion** a year in food waste compared with 2007 and saving **5 million tonnes** of carbon dioxide – that's like taking **2.1 million** cars off the road.

DID YOU KNOW?

More than eight million pumpkins are thrown in the bin at Halloween, containing a total of more than 18,000 tonnes of edible pumpkin flesh. Sixty percent of us admit to carving out the pumpkin and not eating its flesh.



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OPINION

"We are in a climate emergency, and we can no longer jeopardise our future for food that goes straight in the bin."

– Statement by Greenpeace, environmental campaigners

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT



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Food waste isn't just expensive, it's bad for the environment, too. When it's thrown in the bin, it ends up in landfill sites. Here, food waste releases methane, a damaging greenhouse gas.

There is also an environmental cost involved in shipping or flying foods to the UK from all around the world. We can now buy fruit and vegetables all year round because they are flown in from around the world when they are out of season in the UK.

There is also a large carbon footprint left by the meat industry that comes from the feeding, slaughtering and exporting of animals. The global meat industry produces more greenhouse gas emissions than all cars, planes, trains and ships combined! So if meat ends up in the bin, it's doubly damaging for the environment.

MIXED MESSAGES

Supermarkets have been criticised for placing confusing dates on food packaging. This can encourage food waste, as people throw away items that have gone past the date printed on the label, even though they are perfectly OK to eat. Some supermarkets have removed "best before" labels from many of their own-brand fruit and vegetables to help cut food waste. But as well as "best before" dates, you might have seen a "use by" date, a "sell by" date and even a "display until" date. What do they all mean?



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- **Use by date** – This is supposed to be used on food that will go off quickly, such as fresh meat, fish, dairy and salads. Eating these products after the 'use by' is potentially dangerous to your health.

- **Best before date** – This appears on frozen, dried, tinned and other foods and is about quality, not safety. When the date is passed, it doesn't mean that the food will be harmful, but it might begin to lose its flavour.
- **Display until or sell by dates** – These are used by some shops as instructions for shop staff, not shoppers. Supermarkets were criticised for using these confusing dates that have nothing to do with the quality or safety of the food product. Some of the big supermarkets, including Tesco, have now removed "display until" dates.

- Being creative with leftovers: most foods can be recycled and re-used in different recipes.
- Asking for a doggy bag if you're in a restaurant and don't finish your food.

INDIVIDUAL ACTION

Here are some things we can all do to reduce food waste, starting right now!

- Only buying what we need by planning meals in advance, rather than shopping without any idea what we actually need.



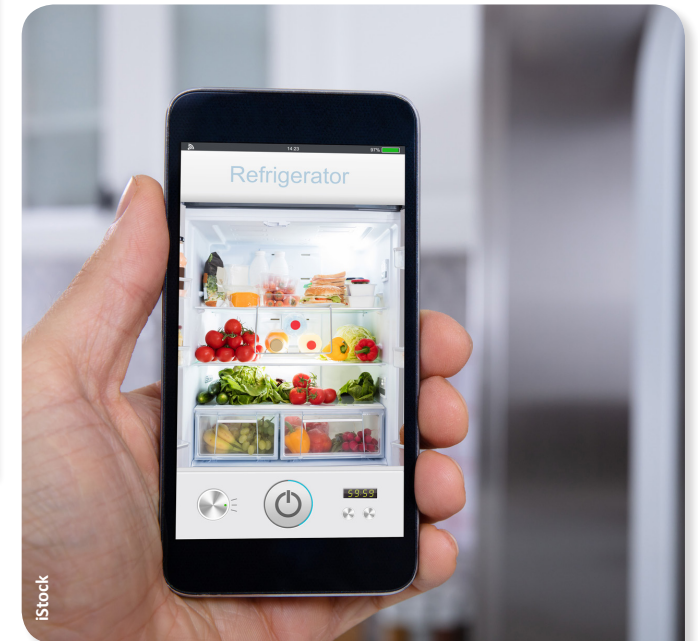
- Using food recycling bins where they are available. In some parts of the country, food rubbish is collected by the local council and used for compost. This is natural matter, such as food, plants, grass and flowers that is used to improve the quality of soil, and therefore helps things grow. The Government wants all food waste to end up as compost or fertiliser to generate energy by 2030.



GOVERNMENT ACTION



Here are some actions the Government could take to force us to reduce food waste:



- **Investing in technology** – If we're serious about cutting food waste, we should use technology to help. Apps, smart fridges, digital lists – these days there are many ways we can keep tabs on the food we've already bought, and work out when it's going to go off. The Government could encourage businesses to develop tech that will reduce food waste, and even help people pay to have it installed in their homes.

- **Fines for individuals who waste** – Bins outside people’s homes, which belong to the council, could be fitted with scales that record how much waste is in them. If people throw away more than a certain amount, they could be fined. This would encourage people to throw away less – but there’s the danger they just end up taking their rubbish to public bins or, even worse, dumping it in public spaces, just to avoid the fine.



- **Forcing supermarkets to give food away** – Just like in France, politicians could introduce a new law to force supermarkets, restaurants, sandwich shops and others to give away food that would otherwise be chucked in the bin. This could be donated to homeless hostels, food banks, charities and even schools, youth clubs and care homes for the elderly or disabled.



- **Fining supermarkets** – Figures from Tesco a couple of years ago showed that as much as 44% of bread produced in the UK is wasted, and only half of that is from homes. Supermarket bakeries are producing far too much bread – even too much for charities who they offer it to, but who can’t take it all! So one idea that has been suggested is for supermarkets to be fined for each tonne of waste they produce each year, to encourage them to make and stock less food in the first place.



- **Education** – More could be done to educate children and adults about food waste. This should include classes in schools, TV and online adverts, posters in supermarkets and information printed on food packaging about what to do with leftovers. There are campaigns and websites that are already trying to tackle the problem of food waste, but a lot more could be done to inform people.



YES, THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO MORE TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE



1. THE SITUATION IS REALLY BAD

We can't go on like this. Although there has been some improvement, it's nowhere near enough. Nearly ten million tonnes of food is thrown out every single year. It isn't just a waste of food and money – it also has a big environmental impact, at a time when climate change is causing the planet serious problems. This is a crisis.



2. PEOPLE ARE GOING HUNGRY

The UK is one of the richest countries on Earth, yet millions live in poverty and don't get the food they need. So it's even more ridiculous that so much good food is chucked out every single day. The Government should step in and take firm action to make sure food isn't wasted.

3. BUSINESS AND INDIVIDUALS DON'T DO ENOUGH

The French government has shown the positive effects of politicians taking the lead and forcing businesses to do what's right. Considering the small amount of food that supermarkets in the UK give to charity – and that most supermarkets don't even reveal their total waste – it's up to the Government to force them to give unsold food away or face expensive fines.

NO, IT ISN'T THE GOVERNMENT'S JOB TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE



1. THIS IS NOT A JOB FOR THE GOVERNMENT

Freedom of choice is an important part of living in a free, democratic country. Businesses and individuals should be left to decide what they do with their waste. The vast majority of governments worldwide don't interfere in this question – why should ours?



2. FINES MAKE PEOPLE POORER

Any system of fines will end up punishing the poor, who cannot afford it, more than the rich. If supermarkets end up being fined for every kilogram of food they chuck, they will almost certainly pass that cost on to the consumer in the price we pay for food. And it isn't fair to charge individuals for the food they throw out – especially if they might have made an honest mistake.

3. EDUCATION IS BETTER THAN PUNISHMENT

Informing people and businesses, and helping them to make good decisions about food waste, is a far more constructive approach than the Government being tough. Nobody likes to be punished or lectured. It's far better to help them to understand how they can reduce their food waste.

DISCUSS

Do you think you throw too much food away?

DISCUSS

What kinds of foods do you or your family chuck?

DISCUSS

How can education and information help reduce food waste?

DISCUSS

Do you think your parents plan their food shopping in advance?

DISCUSS

What can you do as an individual to reduce food waste?

DISCUSS

What steps, if any, should the Government take to bring food waste down? Why?

DISCUSS

Can supermarkets and other businesses be trusted to reduce food waste on their own?

DISCUSS

Do you think fining supermarkets or individuals is helpful? If so, why, and if not, why not?

DISCUSS

What steps, if any, shouldn't the Government take to bring food waste down? Why?

DISCUSS

What would make you less likely to throw out food?

