

# Wasted opportunities:

How supermarkets can help  
tackle food waste



# **About the NFWI**

## **The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI)**

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) is an educational, social, non-party political and non-sectarian organisation. It was established to ensure that women are able to take an effective part in their community, learn together, widen their horizons, improve and develop the quality of their lives, and together influence local, national, and international affairs on issues that matter to them and their fellow members.

Founded in 1915, the NFWI is the largest voluntary women's membership organisation in the UK with some 220,000 members in over 6,300 Institutes across England, Wales, and the Islands. The NFWI has a long history of undertaking educational work and campaigning on a diverse range of issues. The first NFWI mandate was passed in 1918 and since then the organisation has accumulated a wide-ranging portfolio of policy concerns on a local, national, and international level. The NFWI resolution process means that members play a central role in defining policy and bringing issues onto the organisation's national agenda.

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# Foreword

At the 2016 NFWI Annual Meeting WI members overwhelmingly supported a resolution calling on supermarkets to take action to avoid food waste. Like all WI resolutions, it stemmed directly from the concerns of members. The proposer was passionate about combating food waste, and drew on her own experiences of her family farm.

The Food Matters campaign that emerged from this resolution follows a proud history of WI campaigning on food. Our roots were in ensuring a stable food supply during both World Wars, and members bottled and preserved thousands of tonnes of fruit and vegetables that would otherwise have gone to waste. Since then the WI has been at the forefront of debate and discussion about our food system with campaigns to promote a sustainable dairy industry, to protect the environment and consider the challenges of food security.

Much progress has been made to ensure a sustainable food supply and to tackle food waste since the WI's pioneering efforts in our early days. But in passing this resolution members recognised that there is more still to be done, and that supermarkets have a unique position in influencing both food production and consumption.

This report is based on a survey of WI members, 5000 of whom shared their views on food waste in the home, and investigated practices on the supermarket shelves.

What we found was both surprising and disconcerting. In many cases there was a disconnect between retailers' rhetoric, and what was in fact happening on the shelves.

The message from WI members was clear; practices that encourage overbuying need to end; labelling



must be clear and consistent to maximise the life of a product in the home; and retailers must stop rejecting produce because it may not look perfect.

This report sets out practical steps that supermarkets can take to further drive progress on cutting food waste. WI members will be visiting supermarkets up and down the country with the WI Food Waste Manifesto that accompanies this report and asking them to pledge action on these key issues.

I hope that this report will encourage supermarkets to use their powerful position to support consumers to waste less food so that we can all play our part in ensuring a secure and sustainable food system for the future.

**Janice Langley**  
NFWI Chair

# Summary

At the 2016 WI Annual Meeting, a resolution was passed calling for supermarkets to commit to an enhanced voluntary agreement to avoid food waste, and to increase redistribution in order to help tackle food poverty. The WI Food Matters campaign was launched following the Annual Meeting, and seeks to encourage further and faster progress on the issue.

This report marks the first stage of the campaign, and presents the findings of two surveys that the NFWI conducted with WI members during autumn 2016. The intention and outcome of the survey is to provide supermarkets with a snapshot of consumer attitudes towards retail practices and to set out a number of ways in which retailers can make further positive progress to reduce food waste.

The report takes as its starting point the recognition that supermarkets play a hugely important role in shaping the food culture in our society, from farm to fork. The UK grocery market is worth £178 billion a year,<sup>1</sup> and supermarket policy and practice impacts on our food system at all levels, including production, supply, consumption, and food waste in the home.

At an individual level, the store environment plays a huge influencing role in our shopping habits, with factors like the shop floor layout, offers and products available, and the information on the shelves and on packaging, playing a role in our purchasing decisions. Concerns have been raised that multi-buy offers and multipack deals can encourage overbuying, with surplus food then wasted in the home. Unclear and inconsistent labelling can lead to consumers throwing away still edible products.

Similarly, supermarkets can have an impact further up the supply chain. Strict grading criteria set by retailers have been blamed for causing vegetables and fruit to be wasted at production level because crops do not meet these exacting appearance

standards. These standards have also been accused of normalising an unrealistic culture of 'perfect produce'.

We acknowledge that recent years have seen concerted efforts to tackle food waste, both from supermarkets themselves and through partnership working with the voluntary sector. Most notably, successive Courtauld Agreements have seen industry and experts come together to commit to reducing waste, with the most recent Courtauld 2025 agreement setting out targets for food waste reduction. We have also seen supermarkets pioneer good practice, like Tesco's decision to publish their food waste data, and Sainsbury's removal of multi-buy offers from their stores.

Yet, following consistent and impressive progress, recent figures suggest that efforts to tackle household food waste have stagnated, up from 7 million tonnes in 2012, to 7.3 million tonnes in 2015, with an average cost to UK households of £470 every year.<sup>2</sup>

The environmental, social and economic consequences of this are clear, and the NFWI firmly believes that in an era of climate change, pressures on the environment and increasing food poverty, retailers must take all actions possible to use their significant resources to positively influence both consumer behaviour and the wider retail industry.

We hope that this report will inspire retailers to rethink their approach and commit to further sustained efforts to tackle food waste with the confidence that they have the support of a large proportion of their customer base.

# Key findings and recommendations

## 1. An end to overbuying

### Multi-packs:

#### **What we found**

40% of WI members said that prepacked products led them to overbuy, with 84% expressing a preference for buying products loose. WI members told the NFWI that being given the opportunity to buy products loose or in smaller packs at a similar price per kilo to larger packs were the two best interventions supermarkets could take to help them reduce food waste in the home.

### Multi-buys:

#### **What we found**

The NFWI's research found that multi-buy offers are widely available in supermarkets, with 75% of supermarkets surveyed offering at least one type of multi-buy on fresh perishable products. When broken down by the six main retailers surveyed, the NFWI found that different supermarkets had different approaches to multi-buys, with Sainsbury's in particular offering far fewer multi-buys. 91% of WI members said that they would rather be offered a reduction on a single item rather than be encouraged to buy in bulk via multi-buys.

#### **What we would like to see**

Supermarkets need to offer consumers the option of buying products loose, or offer smaller packaged products at a similar price per kilo to larger packaged products. Whilst the NFWI recognises that packaging plays a role in protecting food, if the public are overbuying because they don't have a choice in the amount they buy, which is then leading to waste, the purpose of packaging is being negated. The NFWI would like supermarkets to balance the need for packaging against providing the public with choice about the quantities they purchase.

#### **What we would like to see**

Retailers should reduce the number of multi-buys they offer consumers and instead offer a discount on individual items. Whilst some supermarkets have committed to reducing the number of multi-buys that they offer, others have not, and we would like to see a consistent approach across all supermarkets.



## 2. Extending the life of a product in the home

### Date labelling:

#### **What we found**

There was significant confusion amongst WI members about the meaning of date labels, with only 45% understanding that best before dates were an indicator of food quality, and 74% understanding that use-by dates were a marker of food safety. 47% of members told the NFWI that they use date labelling as a guide to knowing how old food is, while a significant minority of members – 41% – told us that they assess food on its own merits, and eat it if it looks or smells ok. Despite this confusion the survey found that WI members are more likely to throw food away if it has passed its use-by date than if it has passed its best before date.

### Once-opened instructions:

#### **What we found**

More than a thousand own-brand products were compared with their branded equivalent in order to assess the length of time that was given to consume each product once-opened. The NFWI found significant disparities when comparing these once opened instructions, with 35% of products analysed displaying different instructions. These disparities existed even for products with identical formulations such as tinned tomatoes. Overall, branded products had a longer life once-opened when compared with their equivalent own-brand product. For many of the products that were examined, it was unclear whether the once-opened instructions were an indication of food safety, or food quality.

#### **What we would like to see**

Given the influencing role of date labels on consumers, retailers need to consider how they can be used to their best effect to extend the amount of time a product can be consumed in the home. They should further educate consumers on the correct meaning of date labels, emphasising that best before dates are a marker of food quality and the product can often be used well beyond this date. They should ensure that the most suitable date label is used on a product (best before dates, rather than use-by dates on yoghurts where appropriate, for example). The NFWI would also like to see retailers piloting the removal of best before date labels altogether on packaged whole fruit and veg products, and instead emphasise the correct storage method for that product.

#### **What we would like to see**

The NFWI would like supermarkets to extend the amount of time the consumer has to use a product in the home by reviewing their 'once-opened' instructions on product packaging to ensure that these are consistent and reflective of the full open-life of the product. Furthermore the NFWI would like to see supermarkets removing once-opened instructions on products where food safety is not an issue, and endorse the Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) recommendation that "...open life guidance is only used for products where food safety is a potential issue and not when the limiting factor is quality."<sup>3</sup>

## **Innovative packaging:**

### **What we found**

39% of WI members told the NFWI that packaging which enabled them to split a product by portion would help them waste less food in the home. The NFWI's supermarket survey did find examples of innovative packaging which allowed consumers to split, portion or reseal bigger pack sizes, or to keep a product fresher for longer. However there were a limited number of these on offer and they were confined to one or two product lines and, in many cases, were applied mainly to branded items.

### **What we would like to see**

The NFWI welcomes existing innovations in product packaging, but at present these are too few and far between. Where packaging is deemed necessary, the NFWI would like to see supermarkets introducing innovations (such as the ability to split or reseal a product) wherever possible to help prolong the life of the product in the home. The life prolonging qualities of packaging should be made clear and obvious to customers on front of pack, and supermarkets should be prepared to share new innovations in packaging across the industry.

## **3. Fully utilising the farm crop**

### **Wonky fruit and veg:**

#### **What we found**

90% of WI members said that they would be happy to buy fruit and veg which is blemished or misshapen, irrespective of whether or not the product was cheaper. However the NFWI's supermarket survey showed that in many supermarkets the choice to do this was not there. Only 29% of supermarkets surveyed carried a dedicated wonky fruit and veg range, with 68% of these stores offering only one or two products. 48% of stores surveyed carried a 'value' range of fruit and veg.

#### **What we would like to see**

Supermarkets should be making wonky fruit and veg available to their customers as standard and make greater efforts to promote misshapen ranges with in-store displays to ensure that customers are aware of the existence of these ranges. Relaxing grading standards across all product lines in order to include a bigger proportion of the crop (where existing regulations allow) as well as carrying a bigger and better array of wonky fruit and veg as part of a dedicated range, or via a 'value' range, would help achieve this. The NFWI would like supermarkets to be upfront about the amount of food that is 'graded out' and the impact on crop wastage, enabling retailers to celebrate their successes in this area, and highlight areas where retailers are falling behind.

## 4. Supermarket transparency on food waste

### **What we found**

Whilst our survey did not look specifically at the issue of supermarket transparency on food waste statistics, we found that the lack of clarity in this areas frustrated our efforts to get a complete picture of the retail landscape.

The majority of retailers have refrained from publishing their food waste data publicly and, to date, only Tesco provides a third-party audited breakdown of its in-store food waste and Sainsbury's has published some data. Whilst retailers make their figures available to the Waste Resources Action Programme, these are not accessible to the public at large. Moving up the supply chain, there is even less understanding as to the amount of food wasted at production level and the impact supermarket practices have in contributing to this waste.

### **What we would like to see**

The NFWI would like to see retailers be much more transparent about their food waste statistics. This would provide a baseline from which progress on food waste could be measured and give supermarkets the opportunity to identify areas of high food waste. Supermarkets should publish an annual breakdown of their food waste statistics, across their supply chain, in a format accessible to consumers. Data should be equivalent across retailers for easy comparison and should be audited by an independent third party.





# **Methodology**

From September to November 2016, WIs and WI members across England, Wales and the Islands were invited to complete two surveys. The first was an individual survey which asked a series of questions about WI members' shopping and consumption habits. The second was a supermarket survey which asked WIs to visit their local supermarket. Paper copies of both surveys were distributed to all 6300 WIs in England, Wales and the Islands. Both surveys were also uploaded onto SurveyMonkey and WI members were invited to respond online.

## **The individual survey**

The individual member survey asked WI members to consider how much food waste they generated, and then asked them to situate their food waste practices within the context of purchasing habits, date labelling guidance, and storage of food in the home. The survey also sought members' views on cosmetic standards for fruit and vegetables, supermarket interventions and their own attitudes to food waste. The questions were a mixture of multiple choice, rating scale, and free text. For the online survey, the question responses were randomised where possible.

## **The supermarket survey**

The supermarket survey asked WIs to nominate a WI member or members to visit their local supermarket to assess the supermarket environment to enable the NFWI get a more accurate picture of what was happening in supermarkets 'on the ground'. The survey asked members to assess the number of multi-buys offered in store on fresh product categories, such as buy one get one free and three for two; the availability of misshapen fruit and vegetable ranges and number of different product types on offer (this included dedicated 'wonky' ranges and 'value' ranges). It also examined the availability and type of innovative packaging for fresh meat, fish and dairy products; and examination of 'once-opened' instructions on five sealed packaged products to compare the open-life of branded products with the own-brand supermarket equivalent.

# The sample

## The individual survey

4273 completed surveys were received via SurveyMonkey and in paper format. 2939 were completed online; 1334 were received in paper format. The paper surveys were inputted manually into SurveyMonkey to gain the complete data set. The majority of respondents fell into the 55-64 and 65-74 age category, and lived in two person households with their spouse or partner. Respondents were spread across regions, with fewer responses from Wales. The survey was not weighted to take into account age or other demographic data.

## The supermarket survey

Members completed 909 supermarket surveys. The majority of these (821) were received in paper format and inputted into a spreadsheet. 88 were transposed by WI members into an online link on SurveyMonkey, provided by the NFWI.

WIs visited the following supermarkets:  
Aldi (18), Asda (57) Booths (10), Budgens (1), Costcutter (1), Iceland (3), Lidl (20), Marks and Spencer (14), McColl's (1), Morrisons (162), Radco (1) Sainsbury's (205) Shoprite (1) Spar (3) Tesco (218) The Co-op (82) Waitrose (111), Other (1)

The top six supermarkets WIs visited by number were:

Tesco (218)  
Sainsbury's (205)  
Morrisons (162)  
Waitrose (111)  
The Co-op (82)  
Asda (57)

In the report, only these six retailers were analysed in instances where data was broken down by supermarket, due to the limited data available for the other retailers visited. Where applicable, these retailers are referred to as the 'main six supermarkets' in our report.

Along with Aldi (which has now overtaken Waitrose and the Co-op) these six retailers form the vast majority of the grocery retail market in the UK. The data is intended to provide a snapshot of the environment in which supermarkets are operating.

## Chapter 1:

# An end to overbuying

**“We are all encouraged to buy too much food ...[it is] not valued enough as a basic necessity.”**

**(WI survey respondent)**

Multi-buy and volume offers have long been used as a tool by supermarkets to tempt customers into their stores. Yet the public have increasingly been voting with their feet, abandoning the bigger supermarkets in favour of ‘budget’ supermarkets which offer simpler pricing strategies and lower prices.

Supermarkets have responded to this change in shopping habits, and to increasing scrutiny of their marketing practices, by announcing reductions in the number of multi-buys on offer. This move away from ‘buy one, get one free’ (BOGOF) offers was evident in the findings of our supermarket survey which found that only 10% of all supermarkets surveyed offered these BOGOFs in store on fresh produce.

Despite this move, our survey found that other volume offers such as buy three for two, and buy 2 for £X are still prevalent.

While there is no conclusive data showing that multi-buys cause people to waste more, WI members overwhelmingly said that they wanted more freedom to be able to buy their food in quantities that are convenient to them. They also told us that supermarkets should be doing more to enable consumers to buy products in smaller quantities, by getting rid of multipacks in favour of selling products loose; and where products were sold in multipacks, ensuring that smaller packs of food worked out at a similar price per kilo to larger ones.



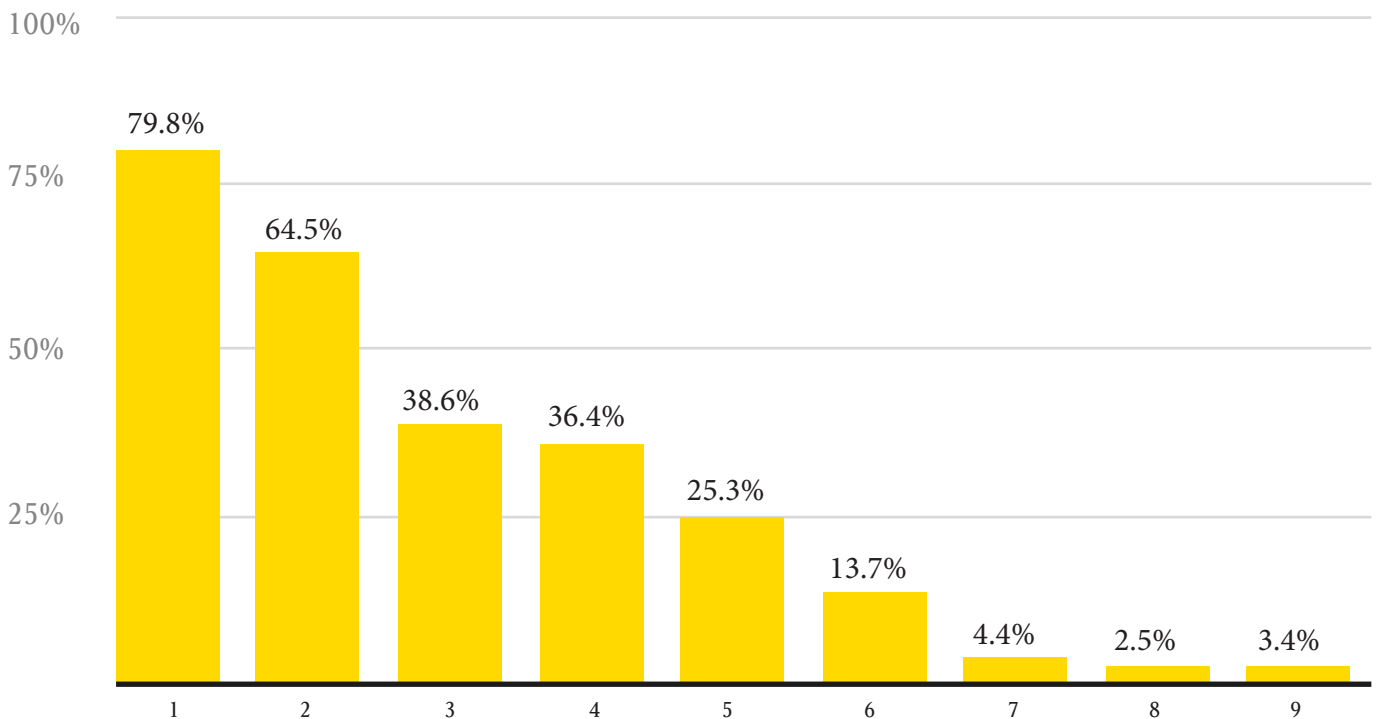
# Our findings

## Multi-packs

**“[There is] a general assumption that 'family packs', 'xxl packs' etc are universally a good thing. Many households are single persons & would appreciate small packs eg salad leaves.”  
(WI survey respondent)**

We asked members to choose the three actions that supermarkets could take to help consumers reduce the amount of food waste generated in the home. Changes to packaging and portions to enable consumers to buy or use food in smaller quantities received overwhelming support. Eighty percent of WI members told us that supermarkets should sell products loose so that they could buy only what they needed, and that this would help them reduce waste in the home. Sixty five percent said they would like to see supermarkets selling smaller packs of food sold at prices per kilo, which worked out similar to larger ones.

**Which of the following do you feel supermarkets should do which would help you to reduce food waste in your home? (choose up to three)**



1. Ensure products are sold loose so I can buy only what I need 79.8%
2. Sell smaller packs of some foods at prices (per kilo) that work out similar to the larger ones 64.5%
3. Introduce packaging which enables you to split the product by portion 38.6%
4. Stop promoting buy one get one free and other similar offers 36.4%
5. Make sure that information on date labels are clear, not confusing 25.3%
6. Provide more ideas on how to use up leftovers 13.7%
7. Stop selling food that is close to its BBE or 'Use by' date at a discount 4.4%
8. None of the above 2.5%
9. Other 3.4%

## The impact of packaging and product size

It's clear from our research that WI members feel that the presence of packaging, as well as pack sizes, makes a big difference to the quantities they purchase.

Forty percent of members told us that prepacked produce led them to buy greater quantities of food than they needed, when compared with having the choice to buy those products loose, with 11% of those respondents saying that having to buy perishables in multipacks was one of the top three reasons why they wasted food.

Given the demographic of the respondents to this survey (mostly older in 2 and 1 person households), this is perhaps not surprising. But we found that this applied regardless of whether respondents lived in larger or smaller households, with 41% of members in 3+ person households agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, and 39% of those in 1 and 2 person households agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Eighty four percent of respondents expressed a preference for buying products loose as opposed to prepacked. Again when broken down by household there was little variation between 1-2 person households and households of 3 or more, with 85% of 1-2 person households expressing a preference for buying products loose, compared with 80% of 3+person households.

Anecdotally, we found examples of members rethinking their approach to food buying in response to a lack of choice on loose products, as one member told us:

**“Potatoes - you can only buy these in 2.5KG bags unless you want baking potatoes loose. I always end up throwing out most of the bag, so we usually eat pasta or rice instead as it keeps better.”**

Members also told us that they would like to see smaller quantity products being sold at a similar price per kilo to larger products, so that they weren't paying a premium for buying things in smaller packs. Again, when we looked at only respondents in households of 3 people or more, we found that a majority (57%) also expressed support for this. In fact, respondents in both small and large households agreed that they wanted to be able to buy smaller packs of food at similar prices per kilo as larger packs.

**“Food [is] sold in larger and larger packages; it has become really difficult [to] buy just a 1 litre bottle of milk which they sell for a few pence different to a 4 litre bottle”.**

**(WI survey respondent)**

## Multi-buys

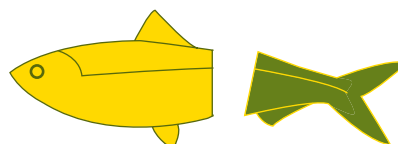
Supermarkets are increasingly moving away from multi-buy offers, both in response to consumer demand, and due to competition from budget supermarkets such as Aldi and Lidl. WI members overwhelmingly told us that they support this approach, with 91% of respondents to our survey saying that they would prefer it if supermarkets offer a reduction on a single item, rather than promote offers such as multi-buy on the purchase of more than one item together. This applied to both larger and smaller households; 92% of respondents from 1 and 2 person households expressed this preference. For households of 3 or more, 88% agreed that they would prefer to be offered a price reduction rather than a multi-buy.

We wanted to establish whether these public commitments had followed through to practice on the supermarket shelves, so we asked members to report whether they were able to see a variety of multi-buy offers on perishables when they visited their local store.

The results show evidence of a positive move in this direction, particularly on BOGOF offers which clearly illustrates that supermarkets no longer routinely offer these promotions on perishable goods. Despite this, several supermarkets still offer other types of multi-buys to consumers. In fact we found that at least one type of multi-buy offer (BOGOF, three for two, or buy 2 for £X) for fresh produce in 75% of supermarkets surveyed.

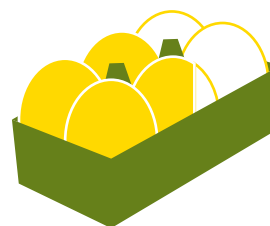
When broken down by product type, multi-buy offers could be found in 61% of supermarkets across the fruit and veg range, in 61% of all supermarkets across the meat and fish range, and in 65% of all supermarkets across the egg and dairy range. These figures exclude 'other' offers, so the figure could in practice be higher.

### Meat and fish aisle (all supermarkets)



- **61% offered at least one type of multi-buy offer**
- 3% offered a BOGOF
- 11% offered a 3 for 2
- 58% offered a buy 2 for £X

### Egg and dairy aisle (all supermarkets)



- **65% offered at least one type of multi-buy offer**
- 4% offered BOGOF
- 9% offered a 3 for 2
- 62% offered a buy 2 for £X

### Fruit and veg aisle (all supermarkets)

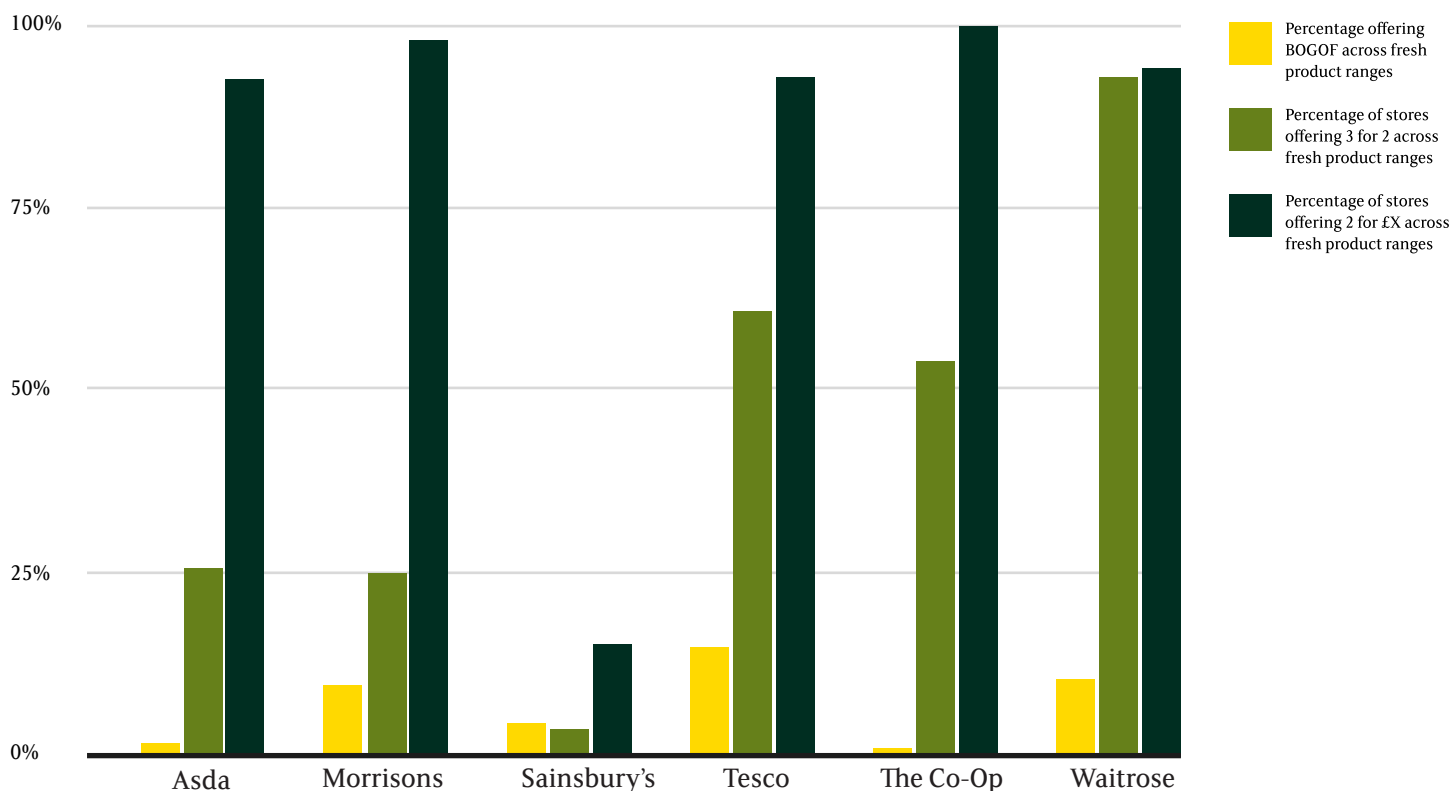


- **61% offered at least one type of multi-buy offer**
- 6% offered a BOGOF
- 31% offered a 3 for 2
- 46% offered a 2 for £X

Furthermore, when broken down by the six main supermarkets we surveyed, we found that, with the exception of Sainsbury's, the remaining five supermarkets continue to offer other types of multi-buy offers as standard, with practices varying

considerably across retailers. For example, 3 for 2 offers were found in 93% of Waitrose stores, compared to only 4% of Sainsbury's stores, with other retailers ranging from 25% (Morrisons) to 61% (Tesco).

### Multi-buys offered by the six main supermarkets surveyed



'2 for £X' appears to be one of the more popular multi-buy offers retailers use, with five of the six supermarkets we polled featuring this type of offer in more than 90% of stores visited. Again, the exception was Sainsbury's stores, where we found that only 16% of the stores surveyed offered these promotions.

We asked members whether they took advantage of available multi-buy offers on any fresh fruit, vegetable, meat, fish or dairy products. Thirty nine percent of respondents to our survey said that they did. Perhaps unsurprisingly, members in larger households were more likely to take advantage of these offers. Fifty percent of those in households with three or more people said they took advantage of multi-buys, compared to 37% of those in one or two person households.

We also asked members whether they felt these offers led them to buy more than they needed,

which sometimes ended up being wasted. Across the whole sample, 16% of respondents agreed with this statement. Interestingly, those in larger households were more likely to agree that multi-buys sometimes led to waste in the home, with 21% agreeing with this statement compared to 15% of respondents from one and two person households.

A significant proportion of members felt that this was an area where supermarkets could help them reduce food waste in the home. Thirty six percent of respondents told us that supermarkets should 'stop promoting buy one get one free and other similar offers'.

Multi-buys have also been shown to be a source of potential confusion for consumers,<sup>1</sup> making it more difficult for them to compare like for like products. This was an issue that some WI members highlighted in our survey.

# Recommendations

Overwhelmingly we heard from WI members, regardless of their household size, that they want to be able to buy products according to their needs. Supermarkets should make it easier for consumers to do this by:

## **1. Selling products in quantities convenient to customers:**

Respondents to our survey told us that multi-packs caused them to buy more than they needed, and that they would rather have the ability to buy products loose or in smaller pack sizes which worked out at a similar price per kilo as larger packs. We would like to see supermarkets making greater efforts to sell products loose or, where this option is not possible, sell items in smaller packets at a similar price per kilo to the larger equivalent.

WRAP's 2015 retailer survey<sup>2</sup> found a reduction in the frequency of products sold in smaller packs across certain product areas. Whilst the NFWI recognises that packaging plays a role in protecting food, if the public are overbuying because they don't have a choice in how much they buy, which is then leading to waste, the purpose of that packaging is being negated. We urge supermarkets to balance the need for packaging against providing the public with choice on the quantities they purchase.

**“...too many confusing offers and far too many large packs. Pensioners and people living on their own need to buy small packs at a reasonable price.”  
(WI survey respondent)**

## **2. Replace multi-buy offers with a price reduction:**

Respondents to our survey told us they would rather be offered a reduction on a single item than the option to buy two or three products together at a discount. We welcome Sainsbury's pioneering approach to remove multi-buy offers on perishables and we found that this commitment was borne out on the supermarket shelves in their stores, where we found very few of these offers. We would like to see more retailers replacing multi-buy offers with price reductions, and believe that adopting simpler pricing structures would also go some way to providing clearer and more consistent information to shoppers, enabling consumers to buy the quantities that they need, as well as giving them the ability to compare products and prices within, and across, supermarkets.



## Chapter 2:

# Extending the life of a product in the home

**“People have been scared by the food industry, and by their own lack of confidence, to rely on date labels and packaged foods as a safer option than relying on their own senses and experience to know when a food is safe to eat or not. This is good news for the food industry but very bad for consumers and councils who have to deal with mountains of waste, that has a cost to all of us.”**  
**(WI survey respondent)**

It is estimated that extending the life of a product by just one day could result in 250,000 tonnes of food waste being avoided, with potential savings to UK shoppers of £500 million<sup>1</sup>. It is, therefore, critical that date labels and ‘consume within’ instructions provide consumers with accurate, clear and consistent information.

The efforts of consumer groups and retailers, along with industry agreements, have resulted in positive progress to remove superfluous or confusing labelling from product packaging. However, our research suggests there is more still to be done. We identified that there is still confusion amongst consumers about the meaning of commonly used date labels, and given the role labelling plays in influencing the way consumers use a product we are concerned that it may be causing needless waste.

Our research into ‘once-opened’ instructions reveals a lack of consistency between branded and unbranded products, with huge disparities in the information given to consumers about how soon a product should be consumed once opened. Quite often, these instructions do not specify whether they are recommendations around food safety or food quality, leaving the consumer to second guess. This suggests that there is more scope for retailers to provide better and more accurate information to consumers to ensure they have the longest possible time to use a product at home.

Members also supported a greater range of innovations in packaging which would allow them to easily split or reseal a pack to maintain freshness in the home setting, however when we surveyed supermarkets we found that this packaging was not widely available on most products and was often limited to one or two product lines.

# Our findings

**“I don’t agree with sell by, best before and use by dates. People have lost the skill of judging whether food is safe to eat by using their own senses. Even if something like tomato sauce is one day past its best before date people will throw it away quite unnecessarily.”  
(WI survey respondent)**

## Date labelling

We asked WI members what their overall attitude was to date labelling. A significant minority – 41.4% - told us that they assess the food on its own merits and will eat it if it looks / smells ok – effectively ignoring the date label altogether. Almost half (47%) told us that they use date labelling as a guide to knowing how old food is, but will still check food before throwing it away.

**Overall, which of the following most accurately describes your attitude to date labelling? (Please tick only one)**

- 6.1%** It’s helpful as it lets me know when food is no longer suitable to eat.
- 47.0%** I use it as a guide to knowing how old food is, but I still check food to see if it is ok before throwing it away.
- 41.4%** I assess the food on its own merits and eat it if it looks / smells like it’s still ok to eat.
- 2.0%** I find it confusing because of the range of different date labelling that is used.
- 2.6%** I throw away food that is past the date on the labelling, even when I think it may still be ok to eat
- 0.9%** None of the above



image credit: Mattz90 Shutterstock

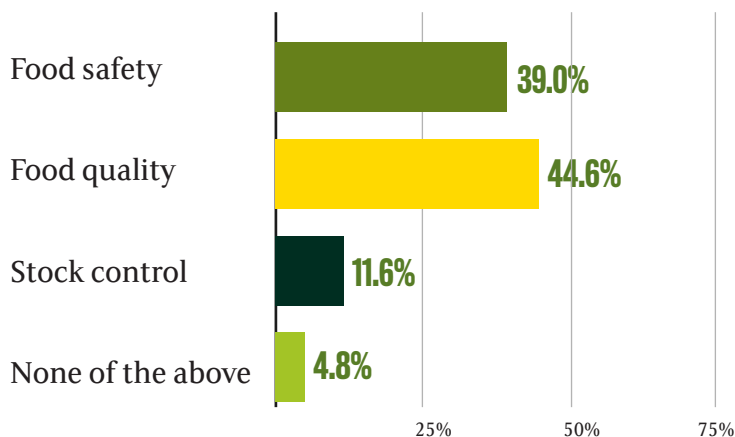
Despite the influencing effect that date labels have on almost half of WI members, we found that there was a significant lack of understanding about the meaning of the three most commonly found date labels; ‘Best Before’ (BB), ‘Use-by’ (UB) and ‘Display until’ (DU). Most notably, only 44.6% of respondents correctly identified that best before dates were to inform consumers of food quality, with 39% answering incorrectly that they were there to inform consumers of food safety.

A much higher proportion of members correctly identified the meaning of ‘Use-by’ labels, with 73.8% correctly answering that the purpose of these labels are to inform consumers about food safety. Yet a significant minority (23%) still incorrectly identified this labelling as an indicator of either food quality or stock control issues.

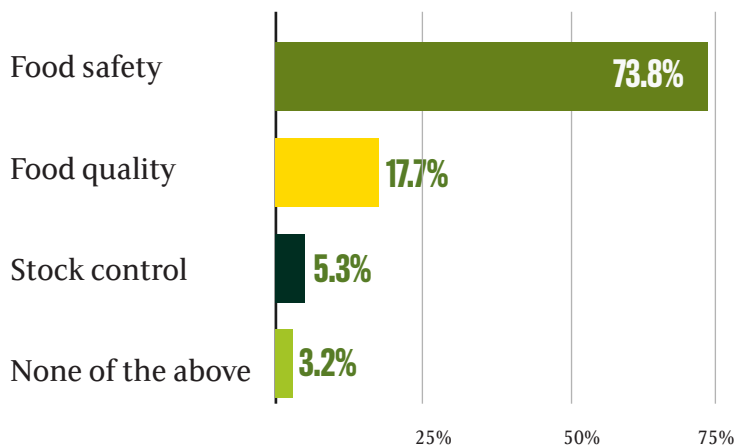
We also asked members about display until dates, which supermarkets sometimes use for stock control purposes. Supermarkets have been encouraged to remove these dates from their products because of the added confusion that they cause, however we are aware that this date mark is still being used on some products. Again there was a lack of understanding amongst respondents about what these meant, with 54.3% stating (correctly) that they were for stock control issues, whilst 23.4% believed they referred to food safety.

When broken down by age, we saw that as the age profile of respondents increased, the understanding of what date labels meant decreased, with a much higher understanding amongst younger people. This was particularly prominent with best before dates and display until dates.

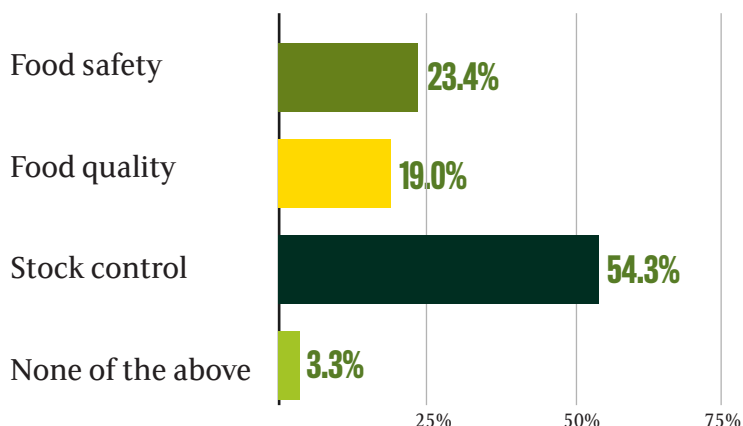
**What do you understand to be the purpose of best before end dates?**



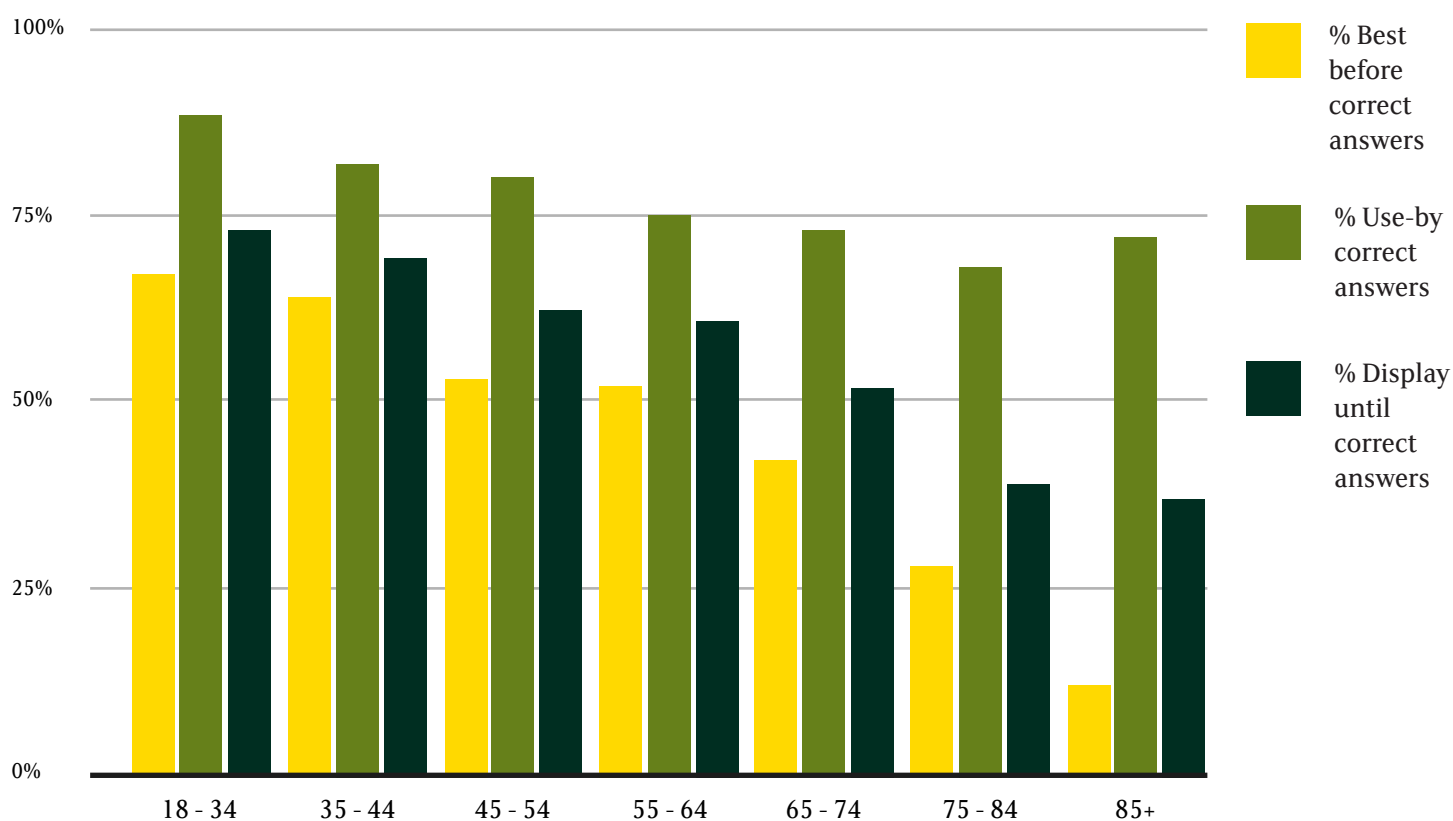
**What do you understand to be the purpose of use by dates?**



**What do you understand to be the purpose of display until dates?**



## What do you understand to be the purpose of use-by, best before and display until? (Correct responses by age)



### Food for thought:

#### Using the right date mark: Use-by vs best before

We asked WI members what leads them to throw away food. Six percent said that they would throw it away if it had exceeded its best before date, whilst 27% said that they would throw it away if it had exceeded its use-by date.

Given that considerably fewer people throw food away if it has reached its best before date than if it has reached its use-by date, it is important that supermarkets are using the appropriate date mark for the product. In recent years, there have been moves by retailers to replace use-by dates on cheese with best before dates. According to WRAP the percentage of pre-packed cheese carrying a use-by date went down from 25% in 2009 to 3% in 2015.<sup>2</sup>

In its guidance on labelling,<sup>3</sup> Dairy UK states that yoghurt should carry either a best before date or a use-by date depending on the factory conditions in which it is packaged. Despite this, many of the yoghurts we looked at are employing use-by dates. In fact, according to WRAP the number of yoghurts carrying a use-by date has gone up from 57% in 2011, to 91% in 2015.<sup>4</sup>

We believe that there is scope for food manufacturers and retailers to review their labelling practices to check whether use-by dates are the most appropriate date mark for a product or whether a best before date could be safely applied.

We also asked members how they assess food in order to decide whether or not to throw it away. The responses show that WI members are often ignoring date labels – including use-by dates which are there as a marker of food safety – and are more likely to use their own judgment (‘it has passed its best, or ‘it has gone off’).

This applied irrespective of age, apart from for use-by dates and for the response ‘it has gone off’, where we found that younger members were generally more cautious.

**Freezing food**

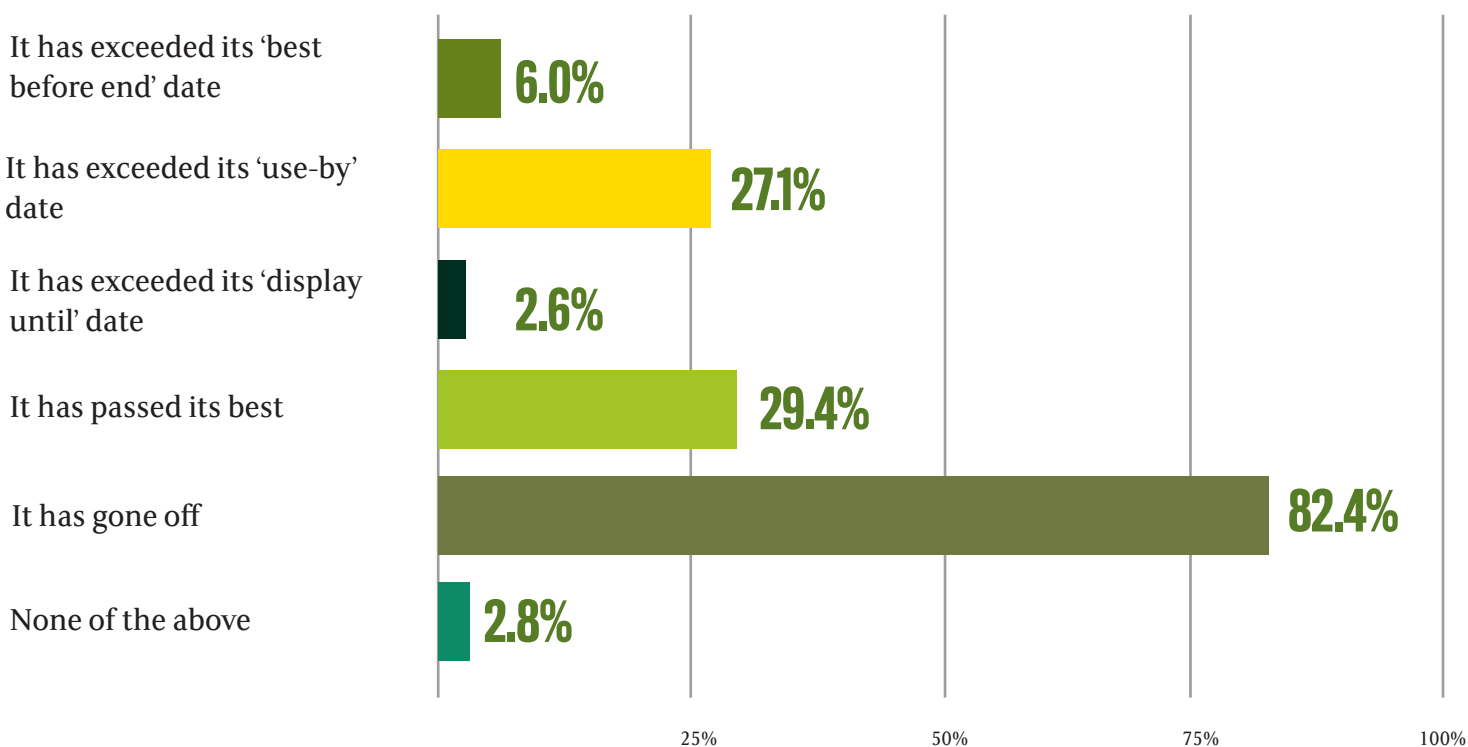
Seventy two percent of WI members stated that fresh food products they purchase will include information about how to freeze and defrost a product. Given that WI members are aware of these instructions and 69% have told us that they use packaging to guide their decisions on using and

consuming food, it is vital that the information given is accurate and isn’t leading people to throw away food unnecessarily.

Many supermarkets have moved away from ‘freeze on day of purchase’ instructions on their packaging, but we are aware that this practice still exists.

Additionally, recent WRAP research shows that the use of the ‘snowflake’ logo, which provides a useful cue to consumers as to whether a product is suitable for home freezing, is diminishing.<sup>5</sup> We would urge supermarkets to standardise their packaging so it gives consumers clear, consistent and accurate information.

**Which of the following will lead you to throw away food? (Please select as many as you like)**



**Food for thought**

**Are date labels always necessary?**

Anecdotally, WI members told us that they believe people are too reliant on date labels when deciding whether or not food is ok to eat, often throwing perfectly good food out unnecessarily. Whilst this is of course conjecture on the part of WI members, it may warrant further investigation.

It is important to note that sensory judgement will not necessarily reveal a food safety risk and so for good reason, many packaged products, such as fresh or cooked meats, are legally required to display a use-by date label, and the Food Standards Agency provides advice to consumers on safe storage and consumption of food. However, date labels are not legally required on other products, such as packaged whole fruit and vegetables.

Lidl has recently removed date labelling altogether from packaged whole fruit and vegetable products, replacing it with a stock code. Like Lidl, we are not convinced that this labelling is required on all fruit and veg, particularly for items that have a longer usable life, such as potatoes and apples. It also presents consumers with an inconsistency when

comparing packaged products with unpackaged products (which have no date label).

We would encourage retailers to consider piloting Lidl's approach, and removing date labelling altogether from packaged whole fruit and veg products (giving more prominence to storage instructions in their place) in order to see whether it positively influences the shelf life of the product in the home. WRAP has advocated further research into the impact of date labels on fresh food products, we are aware from its supplementary evidence to the Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee that this is an approach Tesco is considering. Retailers should work alongside WRAP to determine the best approach to date labels in this context.

**“...today's generations are brought up to consider dates to be the governing guide lines to buying and consuming food. The dates are too arbitrary and only benefit producers and shop.” (WI survey respondent)**



image credit: Sakarin Sawasdinaka Shutterstock

## Once-opened instructions

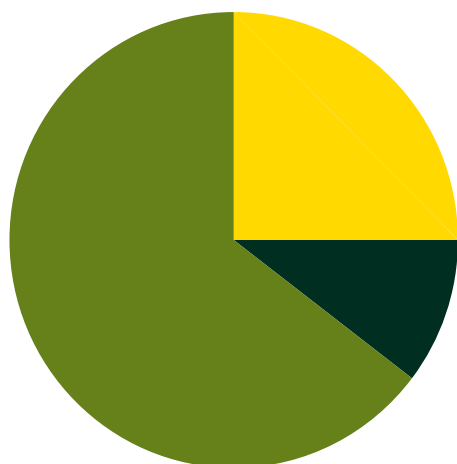
WI members investigated over 1,000 own-brand products in their local supermarkets, and compared the 'once-opened' instructions on the products with their branded equivalent.

'Once-opened' instructions provide information about how soon a product should be consumed after it has been opened at home, and will often include information on how to store the product.

We asked members to look at a branded packaged product and compare it with an own-brand equivalent and tell us whether the packaging contained 'once-opened, consume within X days' information on the label, and if it did, within how many days it was advised to consume that product.

The results were surprising, with open-life instructions varying widely between own-brand products and their branded equivalents; supermarket own-brand products, on the whole, had a shorter once-opened life than the equivalent branded products. Overall, 35% of products sampled had a different open-life when compared with a branded / own-brand equivalent.

**Open-life of products, branded vs own-brand.** (all supermarkets)



**“...why do products have to be used within certain timescales? E.g. jams and chutneys are preserves - how is it they only last a few weeks in the fridge - they look fine after months! Cheese matures for months - why do labels say it has to be eaten within a few days once opened? More advice is needed on what is actually dangerous to eat and what just affects the taste/texture etc.”**  
(WI survey respondent)

**65% Same open-life**

**25% Branded longer open-life**

**10% Own-brand longer open-life**

When broken down by the six main retailers we looked at, we found that there were further differences between supermarkets. Overall Waitrose and Sainsbury's had the biggest differences in open-life.

### Once-opened instructions by supermarket brand (six main supermarkets)

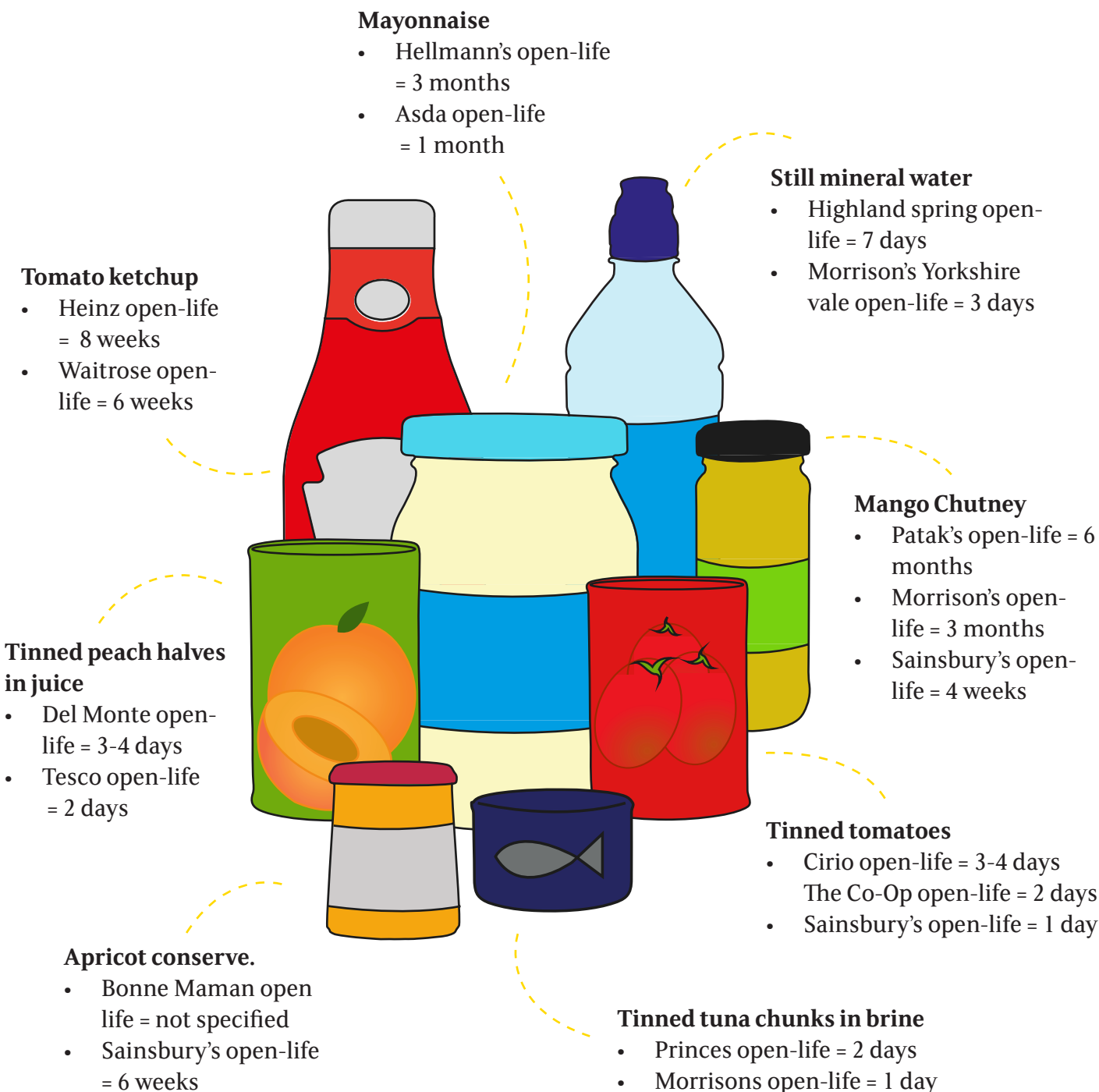
Supermarket	No of products compared	No of branded products with longer once-opened life	No of own-brand products with longer once-opened life	No of products with same once-opened life
Asda	76	17 (22%)	6 (8%)	53 (70%)
Morrisons	185	46 (25%)	9 (5%)	130 (70%)
Sainsbury's	209	62 (30%)	27 (13%)	120 (57%)
Tesco	234	52 (22%)	20 (9%)	162 (69%)
The Co-op	122	32 (26%)	6 (5%)	84 (69%)
Waitrose	158	38 (24%)	27 (17%)	93 (59%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>984</b>	<b>247 (25%)</b>	<b>95 (10%)</b>	<b>642 (65%)</b>



image credit: Anna Kuhmar, Shutterstock



**Open-life instructions appear to be arbitrary and vary widely between products, as the examples below illustrate:**



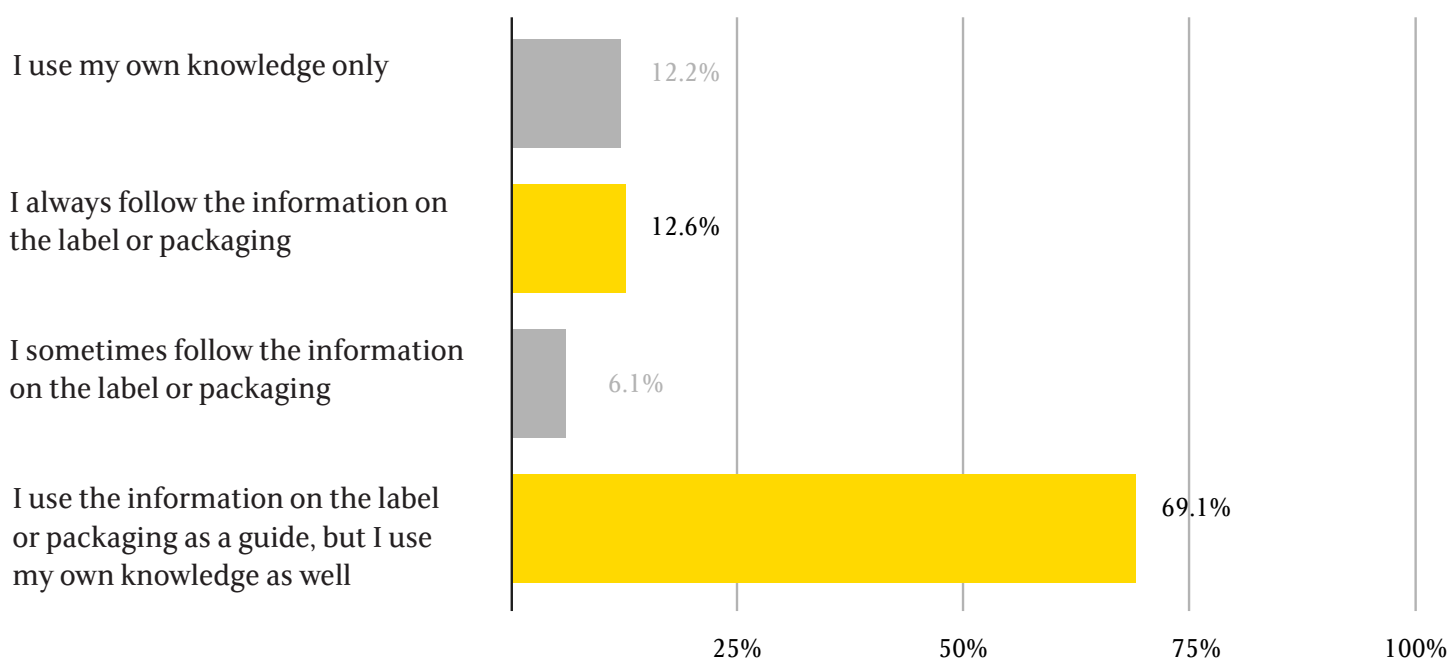
## Our findings

The disparate approach taken towards open-life instructions raises questions as to whether they are in fact required on all the products on which they are currently present or whether manufacturers and retailers are being overly cautious.

WRAP has estimated that £2 billion worth of food and drink is thrown away ‘opened but not finished’<sup>6</sup> and recommends that retailers and manufacturers apply open life guidance more consistently and that it is applied only to food products where food safety is the concern, stating that “...guidance was applied for both quality and safety purposes, and the methodology used to specify the time period, for example, 2 days, varied. It is our recommendation that open life guidance is only used for products where food safety is a potential issue and not when the limiting factor is quality.”<sup>7</sup>

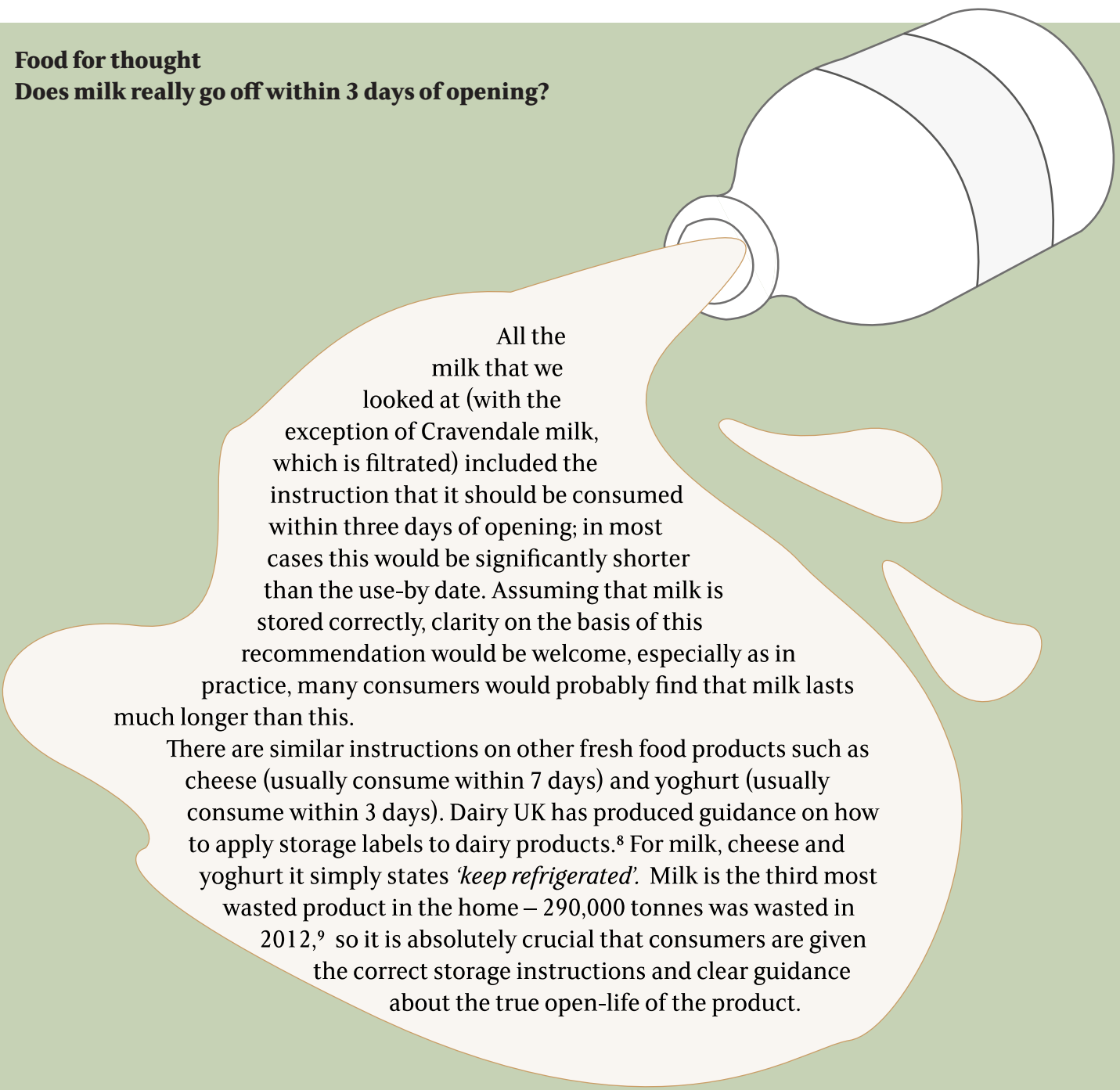
Awareness of the existence of these instructions is high amongst WI members – 85% stated that fresh food they regularly purchase includes information about how long after opening an item should be consumed. We asked WI members how they decided to store a product, whether a product can be frozen, and how long after opening it is ok to eat. It showed that these on-pack instructions do have a guiding role to play in how WI members use products. The vast majority (69%) stated that they use the information on the packaging as a guide, but also use their own knowledge as well. A further 12.6% said that they always follow the instructions on the packaging.

### How do you decide how to store a product, whether a product can be frozen, and how long after opening a product it’s still ok to eat? (please tick only one)



## Food for thought

### Does milk really go off within 3 days of opening?



All the milk that we looked at (with the exception of Cravendale milk, which is filtrated) included the instruction that it should be consumed within three days of opening; in most cases this would be significantly shorter than the use-by date. Assuming that milk is stored correctly, clarity on the basis of this recommendation would be welcome, especially as in practice, many consumers would probably find that milk lasts much longer than this.

There are similar instructions on other fresh food products such as cheese (usually consume within 7 days) and yoghurt (usually consume within 3 days). Dairy UK has produced guidance on how to apply storage labels to dairy products.<sup>8</sup> For milk, cheese and yoghurt it simply states '*keep refrigerated*'. Milk is the third most wasted product in the home – 290,000 tonnes was wasted in 2012,<sup>9</sup> so it is absolutely crucial that consumers are given the correct storage instructions and clear guidance about the true open-life of the product.

## Innovative packaging

Supermarkets are quick to highlight the benefits of packaging, both in protecting food when in transit, and / or to help keep food fresh for longer in the supermarket or home setting. While WI members appreciate these benefits, they are mindful of the increased waste and disposal issues that arise from packaging. The WI has a long history of driving progress in waste reduction, and a 2005-6 campaign focused on supermarket packaging with a national action day that saw members return excess packaging at the supermarket checkout.

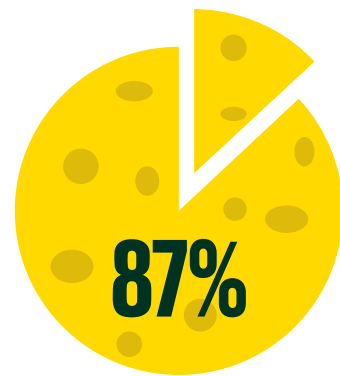
We are aware that supermarkets continue to develop innovative packaging methods in order to reduce the amount of packaging that they use, keep the product fresher for longer, or enable consumers to split portions to prolong the life of their food. WI members support this innovation, with 39% saying they would like to see packaging introduced that enables the consumer to split the product by portion; the third most popular way members feel supermarkets could help reduce food waste.

## Our findings

As part of our supermarket survey, we asked WI members to see if they could find examples of innovative packaging on meat and fish products and cheese and dairy products. For egg and dairy, members found examples of innovative packaging in 87% of supermarkets surveyed. While these figures are very positive for egg and dairy products, we found that most of the responses were confined to one or two products, usually consisting of a small number of branded cheese products in a resealable pack.

Far fewer stores displayed innovative packaging methods for meat and fish products – only 43% of supermarkets surveyed. Generally, innovative packaging was the exception rather than the norm and, although the types of innovations identified ranged across a greater number of products, they were confined to one or two products within a range.

Examples of innovative packaging found include Sainsbury's 1kg turkey fillets, which consist of 5 or 6 in a large bag, marked 'ideal for home freezing' with each fillet sealed separately. One survey respondent commented that similar packaging was available in Tesco, giving the example of large packets of chicken breasts and salmon being individually wrapped. However she stated that these were all considerably more expensive than if purchased in ordinary packaging. Another respondent gave the example of Sainsbury's 'snap and keep' sausages which splits the product into two portions with a peelable seal, but pointed out that the label concealed the snap so that the 'innovative' nature of the packaging was not obvious.



For egg and dairy, members found examples of innovative packaging in 87% of supermarkets surveyed.



Innovative packaging methods were identified for meat and fish products in far fewer stores - only 43% of supermarkets surveyed

# Recommendations

Our survey findings suggest that there is a huge amount of inconsistency in supermarket approaches to product labelling and packaging and that there is more they can do to ensure that consumers have the maximum amount of time to use a product in the home. Supermarkets should:

## 1. Further review date labelling to ensure consistency and ensure that the most appropriate label is being used:

Consumer information on product packaging should be accurate and clear, not arbitrary and confusing. Despite positive moves on the part of retailers to simplify product labelling, the confusion that persists is concerning, both in terms of the implications for food waste (where best before dates are being relied on or misinterpreted), and also for health impacts (where use-by dates are ignored).

With date labels having a guiding influence on almost half of WI members, ensuring that this confusion is removed and that the most appropriate date label for the product is used is important. We would like retailers to consider what further activity they could undertake to educate consumers about the meaning of these labels, as well as look at replacing use-by with best before dates where deemed safe to do so.

A sizeable chunk of WI members also appear to be ignoring date labels altogether, and prefer to rely on appearance or smell when determining whether or not food is ok to eat. Anecdotally WI members have told us that they believe people are too reliant on date labels and are not sufficiently adept at using their own judgement when it comes to eating or throwing away food. This is a concern we share, and whilst we realise that best before dates will often help a consumer know how old a food is, if they are relying on it as the sole marker of whether or not a foodstuff is ok to eat, then food may well be thrown out when it does not necessarily need to be. We believe that there is merit in exploring this

**“Best before dates could be longer. One example: I bought carrots/parsnips with BB dates 2 days hence. Carrots and parsnips can be kept much longer if stored correctly.”**  
(WI survey respondent)

issue further in order to determine the degree to which people are in particular relying on best before labels versus their own judgement, and whether this is resulting in higher levels of food waste in the home. Retailers should trial removing date labels altogether from products exempt by law, in particular packaged whole fresh fruit and veg products with a longer usable shelf-life, and place more emphasis on storage instructions. They should work with WRAP on any research that they commission into this issue.

## 2. Review open-life instructions:

WI members told us that open-life instructions inform how they go on to use that product in the home, so it is important that product labelling reflects the true open-life of that product. Yet we found significant disparities between the open-life instructions given on branded and own-brand products.

While ingredients and formulations may change across branded and unbranded products, many (such as tinned tomatoes or tuna chunks in brine, which only have one or two ingredients), appear very similar and it is therefore difficult to know why such a deep disparity in open life exists between these products – sometimes differing by more than 50%. Furthermore, for many of the examples we looked at, there was no distinction made as to whether the open life instructions present on packaging were recommendations around food quality, or whether they provided safety advice to the consumer.

Given the confusion we identified around date labelling, this lack of clarity is troubling in that the consumer is, in practice, left to decide for themselves whether the instructions are a safety instruction that must be followed, or there for guidance only. While most consumers will understand that tinned fish will go off once opened (though there are significant differences in the recommendations given for these products), for items which contain preservatives, such as tomato ketchup, it is more difficult for consumers to make this value judgement. In all cases, it is foreseeable that consumers will be throwing products out 'just in case'.

Given WRAP's estimate that £2 billion of food and drink is thrown away 'opened but not finished', action to tackle this should be a priority<sup>10</sup>. Retailers and manufacturers should review the 'once-opened' instructions on product packaging to ensure that the open-life instructions on packaging are consistent with equivalent branded and unbranded goods, and accurately reflect the full open-life of the product.

We urge supermarkets to explore extending the amount of time the consumer has to use the product at home, or removing these instructions all together where deemed unnecessary. We endorse WRAP's recommendation that "...open life guidance is only used for products where food safety is a potential issue and not when the limiting factor is quality."<sup>11</sup> This has the potential to significantly increase the shelf life of the product in the home and give consumers the confidence to keep and use a product for longer once-opened.

### **3. Expanding the availability of innovative packaging:**

New packaging methods can help consumers keep food fresher for longer, and WI members told us this was one of the most positive actions supermarkets could take to help them reduce waste at home. Yet, too often, this packaging is the exception rather than the norm. Many of the products where packaging could be improved – for example on fresh meat and cheese products – are part of supermarket own-brand lines, and we believe retailers could be doing more to ensure that these items are packaged in such a way that enables their customers to split or reseal the packaging.

Supermarkets could start with existing innovations to get the ball rolling – such as introducing resealable packs of cheese as standard – and should be willing to share best practice across the industry.

Innovations in packaging alone should not be a reason to increase the price of a product and, unless the amount of packaging used has been increased significantly as a result of the innovation, there should be no price differential when compared to equivalent own-brand products. Any price differential should not be so great as to discourage consumers from buying this product altogether.

As discussed in the 'An end to overbuying' chapter, the WI advocates that products are sold loose where possible to enable customers choose quantities that are convenient to them. It is crucial that where packaging is needed, it should be as minimal as practical, and easily recyclable. In parallel with reducing environmental impact, it is therefore important that consumers are aware of the life extending properties of packaging and that supermarkets are communicating this. If consumers are throwing products away because they aren't fully realising the benefits of the packaging, then any advantages derived from the product being packaged are potentially being negated.

## Chapter 3:

# Wonky fruit and veg as standard

**“The idea that all fruit and veg should be a perfect shape & size means farmers are throwing good produce away before it even gets to the supermarket and are not given a just reward for all the hard work they put into food production. Supermarkets seem unaware that shape or size of fruit or veg is not an indication of quality and therefore discard such items before they even reach the shelves.”  
(WI survey respondent)**

Following the relaxation of EU grading standards in 2009<sup>1</sup>, and more recently in response to media coverage of food waste, supermarkets have made a variety of public commitments to expand their range of misshapen, blemished or imperfect fruit and vegetables. Many have stocked these products either as part of a dedicated wonky fruit and veg range, or as part of a ‘value’ or ‘basics’ range.

Supermarkets have been quick to point to these products as evidence that they are working with producers to increase the amount of each crop that is brought to market. This is welcome. However, our survey identified that these dedicated ranges form only a small part of the supermarket landscape, and often only consist of one or two product lines. We are aware that some supermarkets may have relaxed their appearance guidelines and certainly do so on an ad-hoc basis in response to adverse weather or supply issues. However, it was impossible to assess this through our survey, and there is a general lack of transparency about these grading standards and supermarket food waste throughout their supply chains.

Information about how much food supermarkets accept – or reject – at production level remains hazy. What we do know, however, is that grading standards exist, and we are concerned that restrictive standards may lead to over-production as farmers strive to meet them. We want to see crops utilised to their fullest, and would like to see more transparency on this issue so that consumers can take food waste and sustainability into account when deciding where to shop.

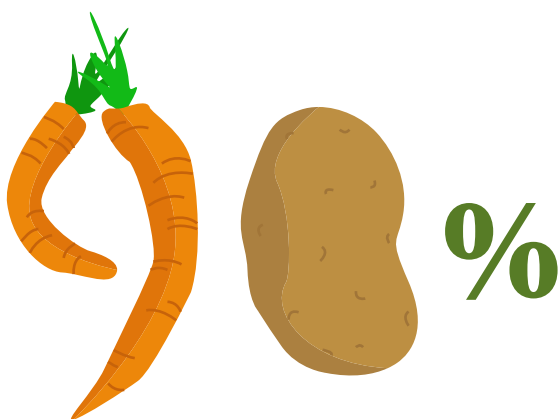
Our survey also found that WI members are happy to buy fruit and veg that does not meet exacting cosmetic standards, regardless of whether these products are offered for a lower price. These findings are echoed by research with the wider public. Supermarkets should strive to offer this enhanced choice across all of their product ranges, not just a select few.

# Our findings

## Buying wonky fruit and veg

We asked members whether they would be happy to buy wonky or misshapen fruit and vegetables. Ninety percent of members agreed that they would be happy to buy wonky fruit and veg, regardless of whether or not it was cheaper. And WI members are not alone in their willingness to purchase these items; research from the Institution of Mechanical Engineers puts the figure at 80% of the public.<sup>2</sup>

We also asked members about grading standards that can mean supermarkets reject produce because it is not a uniform shape and size.



**of members agree that they would be happy to buy wonky fruit and veg regardless of whether or not it was cheaper**

**“Ploughing perfectly good food back into the ground because of over-production or grading issues is criminal when many people are near the breadline.”**

**(WI survey respondent)**

Eighty nine percent of WI members agree that these standards are wrong, with 62% strongly agreeing on this point. It is clear that WI members want to see supermarkets changing their practices at production level to ensure that good food isn't wasted because it doesn't adhere to restrictive cosmetic standards.

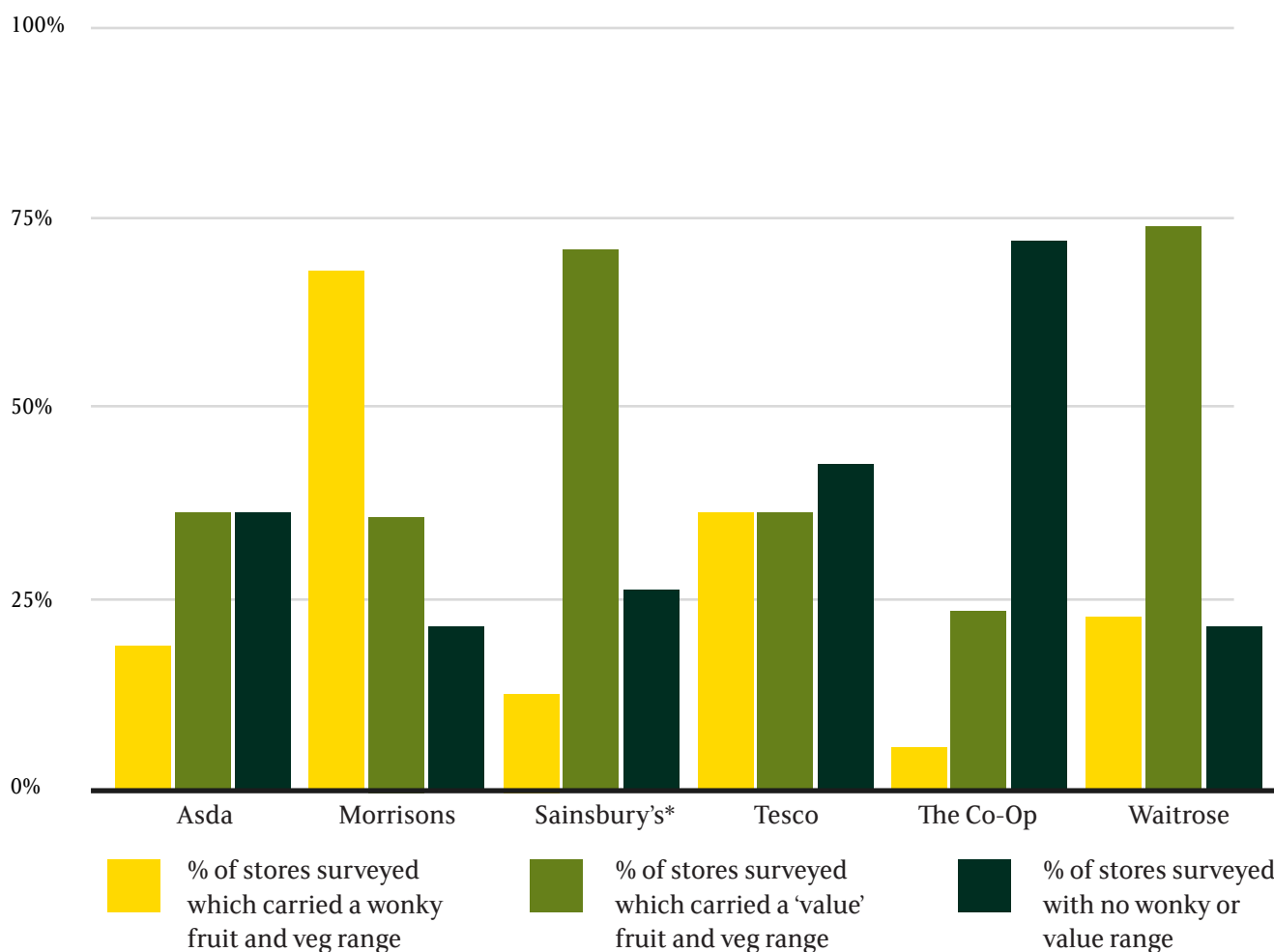
Supermarkets continue to argue that consumers reject misshapen or blemished items, and go for the pick of fruit and veg. In fact supermarkets have in the past relaxed their grading specifications when faced with shortages caused by poor weather, and consumers showed then that they were willing to purchase these products within main ranges. Both Tesco and Asda, who recently introduced 'wonky' ranges, have admitted that these have been met with enthusiasm by customers<sup>3</sup>.



Supermarkets often say that this rejected produce will be used for other ranges, such as soups and ready meals<sup>4</sup>. This is a legitimate and innovative way of using rejected produce, however, with little information in the public domain about the production chain, we question whether all rejected produce is used in this way. Recent media reports have also shown that fresh products that do not meet grading standards can end up ploughed back into the field, used as animal feed, or sent for anaerobic digestion.

**“The unwillingness of supermarkets to stock fruit and veg that aren't all the same size is crazy. The supermarkets blame the consumers by saying that's what we want, but it isn't true. For years we have been presented with perfect looking produce so that is what we have got used to but if we saw a lot more "mis-shapen" items, it wouldn't be long before people started to alter their shopping habits and accept the change.”**  
 (WI survey respondent)

**Percentage of stores carrying wonky fruit & veg, value fruit & veg or no wonky or value range (six main supermarkets surveyed)**



\* Members found products in a 'wonky' range in 13% of the Sainsbury's stores surveyed, despite Sainsbury's not having a 'wonky' range. This is likely to be due to members equating Sainsbury's 'basics' range (where products are often qualified with a statement such as 'no lookers, beautiful mashed' or 'odd sizes, great when it comes to the crunch') with a 'wonky' veg range

## **What is happening in-store?**

Some supermarkets have recently responded to consumer demand on this issue, with Morrisons, Tesco, Waitrose and Asda all launching wonky fruit and veg ranges in one form or another. We wanted to establish how widespread the adoption of these ranges are on the supermarket shelves, so we asked members to look out for ‘wonky’ and value ranges.

We found that despite the fanfare surrounding the launch of these ranges, many stores did not carry these products at all, and if they did, they consisted of only one or two products. Overall, for all stores surveyed, we found that 29% carried a wonky fruit and veg range. Of these stores, 68% offered only one or two products. When broken down by store we found that only 11% of the Tesco stores with a wonky fruit and veg range carried more than two products in their ‘perfectly imperfect’ range. Only 40% of Morrisons stores with a wonky fruit and veg range carried more than two products in their ‘beautiful on the inside’ range.

Furthermore, members pointed out that quite often these ranges were not prominently displayed, or were not immediately apparent.

**“...most of the value “basics” range says it’s wonky or mixed shapes on the packaging. Although unless you read it you won’t know as to be honest they look fine!...”**

**(WI survey respondent)**

A member who visited Morrisons, said of a 1kg bag of carrots that they were

**“not easy to find - displayed on top shelf with small price label stating ‘wonky carrots’.”**

Sainsbury’s have resisted the ‘wonky’ moniker, instead choosing to sell misshapen or blemished produce via their ‘value’ range. WI members found products from the value range in 71% of the Sainsbury’s stores they surveyed, with 66% of these stores carrying more than two product lines. One member who visited Tesco was only able to find Bramley apples in their perfectly imperfect range and commented that :

**“they do have a policy to sell imperfect fruit and veg, but I did not see any displays identifying them, or them being cheaper.”**



image credit: Ralu Cogn, Shutterstock

# Recommendations

WI members told us conclusively that they would be happy to buy fruit and veg that is less than perfect, and they disagree with grading standards set by supermarkets which preclude some items of fruit and veg from reaching the store. This is a stance supported by the public more generally. Supermarkets should:

## **1. Relax grading standards so a larger proportion of the crop is used:**

Supermarkets must recognise the role their standards have played in the creation of a food culture that prizes the appearance of a product over taste. Our view, supported by the views of WI members, is that it should be the norm that consumers are presented with fruit and veg on the shelves that reflect reality. We would like supermarkets to relax their grading standards (where existing regulations allow) across the board so a bigger proportion of the crop can be used across product lines. They should use their considerable marketing power to dismantle the idea of a 'perfect' fruit or vegetable and emphasise to consumers that it's taste that counts, not appearance.

## **2. Sell wonky fruit and veg as standard:**

Supermarkets have been listening to public demand on misshapen fruit and veg, with several introducing wonky ranges in the past few years. However, despite the publicity celebrating their launch, our research reveals that for some supermarkets, wonky or value ranges are only available in a fraction of stores, and across a very limited product range. We would like to see supermarkets carrying a bigger and better range of wonky fruit and veg, with promotional campaigns supporting their sale.

**“My husband grows most of our vegetables and we often eat imperfect products. There is no need for supermarkets to discard fresh food because it does not look perfect.”  
(WI survey respondent)**

## **3. Be clear about how much crop is wasted and what happens to it:**

Unfortunately because of a lack of transparency around supermarket grading standards, it is impossible to know the true extent of food wastage due to these cosmetic standards. There is a great need for more transparency in this area. Supermarkets should be open about the impact of their grading standards on crop wastage (including the percentage of crop screened out by producers) and what happens to produce not accepted. This information should be independently audited by a third party and published in a form easily accessible to consumers. For retailers with a wonky fruit and veg range, they should highlight the number of tonnes of fruit and veg being saved from being wasted by the initiative, as well as the percentage change in the amount of crops getting from producers into supermarkets. This would provide an opportunity for retailers to celebrate successes in this area and would be of great interest to WI members.

## **Chapter 4:**

# **Supermarket** **transparency on** **food waste**

The main objective of this report has been to discuss how retail practices have an influence on the amount of food that is wasted outside of the supermarket setting, and to persuade retailers to rethink their approach to positively impact food waste in this context.

However as an important first step to achieving this, the NFWI believes that much greater transparency is needed from supermarkets in reporting and disseminating their food waste statistics. At present much of the blame for food waste is laid at the door of householders, but there is little understanding as to the amount of food wasted by each retailer. There is even less understanding about the amount wasted at production level.

The majority of retailers have refrained from publishing their food waste data publicly, leaving consumers unable to scrutinise their practices.

To date, only Tesco provides a third-party audited breakdown of its in-store food waste. Tesco has also established 'waste profiles' across its supply chain for 25 of the products most frequently purchased in its stores.<sup>1</sup> According to Tesco this has enabled it to identify hotspots of food waste and target the causes through bespoke action plans for each of the products analysed.

In 2016, Sainsbury's also published its in-store food waste statistics, although it did not give a breakdown of waste by product type and supply chain waste was not considered.<sup>2</sup> The remaining six supermarkets which form the majority of the food retail market share – Asda, Morrisons, Aldi, the Co-op, Waitrose and Lidl – are yet to release food waste statistics. This is despite indications from Asda, Morrisons, Waitrose and the Co-op in 2014 that they would start publishing these.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to grading standards, and the proportion of fruit and veg that makes it to the supermarket shelf, there is even less understanding as to the amount of the crop that is wasted. Both Morrisons<sup>4</sup> and Tesco<sup>5</sup> have stated publicly that there are instances when they will take the entire crop from a farmer. Yet successive media reports have shown images of piles of fruit and vegetables that are being left to be ploughed back into the field as they don't fit restrictive grading specifications. Since its inception in 2012, food charity Feedback's gleaning network has salvaged 228 tonnes of fruit and veg which would otherwise have gone to waste.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that, despite the publicity around supermarket interventions on this issue, perfectly good fruit and veg is being discarded before it has even left the field. Again, Tesco has published some figures setting out how its wonky fruit and veg ranges have been successful in bring a greater proportion of the crop to the market.<sup>7</sup> This is a positive step.

Overall, however, there is still a huge gap in understanding about the amount of food that is rejected by supermarkets due to it being graded out, and the hazy nature of food waste reporting at production level makes it difficult to get a clear steer on what is happening at the farm gate.

## Recommendations

### **1. Promote transparency on food waste statistics.**

Fundamentally the NFWI believes that if supermarkets are serious about achieving decisive progress in tackling food waste, from farm to fork, they need to be transparent about publishing their food waste data. We would like supermarkets to publish this data on their website, in a format easily accessible to the public.

**“I was brought up in a household where all forms of waste were frowned upon, it takes precious resources to produce and distribute food and I think we have all become too greedy and lacking in respect for food. It is amazing that when you have grown something in your own garden it hardly ever goes to waste as you yourself know how much effort has gone into it.” (WI survey respondent)**

Food waste statistics should be audited by a third-party, with the same metrics used across retailers so that data is easily comparable. This would provide a baseline from which progress can be measured and give consumers a fair indication of who is wasting what and where. It would also provide an opportunity for retailers to identify areas of high food waste, as Tesco has done, and work with consumers on tackling their own food waste.



# The WI Supermarket Food Waste Manifesto

The recommendations from this report are reflected in the WI Food Waste Manifesto. WI members will be taking this manifesto to supermarkets to ask them to commit to further action as part of a WI Action Weekend in May 2017.



## The WI Supermarket Food Waste Manifesto

Food Matters: Globally it is estimated that 222 million tonnes of food is wasted every year. This has environmental and economic consequences, and is happening at a time when 1 in 9 of the world's population is living in chronic hunger. Food waste must be tackled.

*"Members of \_\_\_\_\_ WI call on \_\_\_\_\_ supermarket to adopt the following commitments in order to help reduce food waste in the home and across the supply chain."*

**Commitment 1: An end to overbuying**

Supermarkets should offer a price reduction on individual items rather than offering multi-buys on several items.

Supermarkets should enable shoppers to purchase products loose rather than in a multi-pack, so that they can choose quantities convenient to them.

Supermarkets should offer smaller pack sizes that work out at similar prices per kilo/litre as their bigger equivalents.

**Commitment 2: Extending the product life of foods in the home**

Supermarkets should educate consumers around date labels with publicity in store and continue the phase-out of 'display until' dates.

Supermarkets should reassess whether best before dates are needed at all on some packaged fruit and veg products.

Supermarkets should consider replacing use-by dates with the best before dates where food safety is not compromised.

Supermarkets should only use open-life instructions where they are needed for food safety reasons.

Supermarkets should reformat their 'once opened, consume within X days' labels so that they accurately reflect the product life once opened.

Where packaging is deemed necessary, innovative packaging, such as resealable cheese packets, should be introduced by supermarkets as a priority, and not be limited to just one or two product lines.

**Commitment 3: Fully utilising the farm crop;**

Supermarkets should stock and promote a far wider range of wonky or misshapen fruit and vegetables in their stores.

Supermarkets should relax grading standards to ensure that a larger proportion of the farm crop can be used across all product lines.

**Commitment 4: Supermarket transparency on food waste;**

Supermarkets should annually publish their food waste statistics, across their supply chain, in a format accessible to consumers. Data should be equivalent across retailers for easy comparison and auditing should be conducted by an independent third party.

theWI

FOOD MATTERS

image credit: Daxiao Productions, Shutterstock

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## **Summary of key findings**

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3. Waste Resources Action Programme. March 2015. Reducing food waste by extending product life. At p.2 [http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Product%20Life%20Report%20Final\\_0.pdf](http://www.wrap.org.uk/sites/files/wrap/Product%20Life%20Report%20Final_0.pdf)

## **An end to over buying**

1. In 2015, Which? brought a super complaint against retailers which included a complaint around “confusing and misleading special offers that make extensive use of price framing including reference pricing, volume offers and free offers.” [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/554b81d0e5274a157200007c/Summary\\_of\\_super-complaint.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/554b81d0e5274a157200007c/Summary_of_super-complaint.pdf) It covered food, drink, cleaning products and household goods, and the Competition and Marketing Authority found “...examples of pricing and promotional practices that have the potential to confuse or mislead consumers and which could be in breach of consumer law,” though these weren’t deemed to be widespread. They also found that “more could be done to reduce the complexity in unit pricing to make it a more useful comparison tool for consumers.” <https://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/groceries-pricing-super-complaint>
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