

## Information sheet

# How to apply date labels to help prevent food waste

**Having clear and consistent date labels on food packaging helps consumers make the most of the food they buy and waste less. Better labelling reduces confusion, improves food safety, wastes less food and saves consumers money. Helping to reduce food waste can also enhance a company's environmental credentials and brand reputation.**

Food waste has a huge impact on the environment. It also costs consumers around £12 billion every year with 7.2 million tonnes being thrown away annually. This is equivalent to around a fifth of all food and drink purchased. About 2.9 million tonnes of food is thrown away by consumers before ever being cooked or served. Confusion around date labels and storage guidance is a major contributing factor.

This information sheet aims to help food businesses make more informed decisions around date labelling to prevent food waste. There are five key recommendations.

## 1. Choose the right date label

[Guidance](#) has been produced by Defra on how to apply date labels to food. The guide aims to help food businesses apply date labels in a way that complies with the law and is consistent. This **helps consumers make safe use of food and cut down on wastage**. A simple decision tree on page 14 of the guidance will help you in choosing which date should be applied.

'Use by' and 'best before' dates are required by legislation on most pre-packed food; they help consumers to make safe and optimum use of food.

**'Use by'** dates refer to **safety**. Food can be eaten up to the end of this date but not after, even if it looks and smells fine.

**'Best before'** dates refer to **quality**. Foods will be safe to eat after the 'best before' date, but may not be at their best.

### Additional guidance:

**Fruit juices:** The [British Soft Drinks Association](#) and [British Retail Consortium](#) now recommend that all

heat treated (pasteurized) fruit juices should carry a 'best before' rather than a 'use by' date.

**Dairy:** [Dairy UK](#) has produced guidance to support decision-makers on labelling dairy products.

In 2011, only 3% of pre-packed cheeses carried a 'use by' date, compared to 25% in 2009. The move towards a **'best before'** date enables consumers to eat the product after the date, removes the risk of prosecution, and provides more opportunity for donation of un-sold product to charity.

**Fresh produce:** Some products, including uncut fresh produce, are not required by law to carry a date label. As a result, there is currently variation in this category. Discussions with industry have concluded that only one date should be used and the **'best before'** is preferred.

## 2. Remove 'display until' dates

'Display until' dates are not required by legislation but are sometimes used on-pack to assist retail staff with stock rotation.

WRAP research has shown that 'display until' dates can **reduce consumers' understanding of the 'use by' and 'best before' dates**. This results in food that is still within life being thrown away or, potentially, a food safety risk.

Research shows that when a 'display until' date is visible the proportion of people incorrectly interpreting 'use by' as a quality indicator rose from 25% to 32% and the proportion interpreting 'best before' as a safety date increased from 14% to 20%. Consequently, 'display until' dates are **not recommended**.

Figure 1 – 'Display until' dates are not recommended



WRAP's [Retailer Survey](#) found that the use of 'display until' dates has declined between 2009 and 2011, with 39% of products carrying a 'display until' date in the 2009 sample, falling to less than one third in 2011. Further reductions are on-going and several retailers now have whole categories where no products carry a 'display until' date. Removing 'display until' **gives the key food dates more prominence** (Figure 2) and can reduce in-store waste by giving retailers longer to sell products, at discount where appropriate.

Figure 2 - Prominent 'best before' date



### 3. Reiterate what date labels mean

Guidance such as "Do not exceed the use by date" on-pack is helpful; it **reinforces the message that 'use by' dates are about safety**. It was found on 27% of products which carried a 'use by' date in the 2011 Retailer Survey. However, guidance not to exceed the date was also found on 8% of products which carried a 'best before' date. This is unhelpful to consumers as it converts a 'best before' date into a 'use by' date and may lead to food waste.

Once opened, some products, including those carrying a 'best before' date, will have 'use within' guidance (e.g. cooking sauce). This should always be clearly, unambiguously worded so that it relates to the product only once opened. For products without a food safety risk after opening, this guidance could be phrased 'best within' to show that it can be safely consumed after this period.

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### 4. Set the right shelf life

Increasing shelf life could help prevent the £6.7 billion worth of food and drink thrown away by consumers each year because products 'go off' unused. This includes about £2 billion worth of food and drink thrown away 'opened but not finished'.

There are opportunities for industry to:

- 1) improve consistency in how much shelf life is available to consumers within a category; and
- 2) provide longer life **without reducing quality or risking food safety**.

Businesses should review their products to:

- Extend the 'best before' or 'use by' date.
- Extend 'Use / Best within x days of opening'.
- Extend 'Use / Best within x months of freezing'.

### 5. Provide clear storage guidance

The date label is an indication by the manufacturer of the length of time food can be kept under the specified storage conditions. Therefore, **providing clear storage guidance** is essential e.g. "Keep refrigerated below 5°C" for 'use by' dated products.

It is also important that consumers understand how to use products that are nearing their 'use by' date by **including information on-pack or through appropriate channels**:

- Food can be cooked (if applicable) on the 'use by' date and then either eaten straightaway, stored in the fridge for up to two days or frozen.
- Food can be [frozen](#) (if applicable) the day before the 'use by' date, defrosted (in the fridge) and used within 24 hours.

### Helping consumers

Guidance about what date labels mean and how they should be used can be **incorporated into customer-facing communications** using [Love Food Hate Waste](#) collateral and messaging.

### To find out more

Grocery sector research is available at [www.wrap.org.uk/groceryresearch](http://www.wrap.org.uk/groceryresearch).  
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