

# Food Waste

To tackle the climate crisis and meet the UK's Net Zero target there needs to be a strategy for reducing Greenhouse Gas emissions (GHGEs) from the food system. The independent Climate Change Committee recommends food system related emissions are reduced through a reduction in the consumption of animal-based foods and in the amount of food wasted<sup>1</sup>. Landfilling produces significant quantities of GHGEs and is therefore being phased out under EU regulation. For this reason, it is less likely to be a food waste disposal option in the future<sup>2</sup>.



**25% of all the food grown is never eaten in the UK.** This wasted harvest accounts for between **6% and 7% of total UK GHGEs** (The National Food Strategy: The Plan<sup>3</sup>). The majority of avoidable post-farm gate **food waste is generated in the home** (70%) rather than by retailers or food service providers<sup>4, 5</sup>.

## KEY STATISTICS

An estimated **756,000 tonnes of fruit and veg are wasted every year in the UK supply chain**, with an estimated **1.9mn tonnes** wasted in the home. This brings the amount of fruit and veg wasted after the farm gate to 2.7mn tonnes: **30.6% of the total available**<sup>6</sup>.



Globally, **1/3 of all food produced is lost or wasted**<sup>7</sup>.

This is responsible for an estimated **8–10% of global GHGEs**<sup>8</sup>. If food waste were a country, it would be the world's **3<sup>rd</sup> largest emitter** after China and the USA<sup>9</sup>.



**Food waste in the UK amounts to 10.4-13mn tonnes annually.** The government's own impact assessment found that food waste currently costs the UK **£19bn** annually<sup>10</sup>.



**Halving UK food waste<sup>11</sup> would save and offset c. 51mn tonnes CO<sub>2</sub>e<sub>q</sub>** (c. 11.3% of current UK total GHGEs). It would save 0.8mn hectares of cropland which could produce 6.5bn kcal per year – enough to feed 7.9mn people (nearly 10% of the UK population). If potatoes and peas were cultivated on this cropland, it could produce 15.1bn kcal of food – enough for the daily needs of 18.5mn people – including 440mn tonnes of protein<sup>12</sup>.



**70% of companies** signed up to WRAP's Food Waste Reduction Roadmap were **still not reporting data publicly in 2021**<sup>13</sup>.

## WHAT ARE BUSINESSES DOING?

Despite many laudable initiatives to tackle food waste, many businesses are failing to successfully reduce waste in their stores, supply chains and customers' homes. Businesses need to take meaningful action to reduce food waste and develop sustainable supply chains<sup>14</sup>. The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) currently works with retailers and manufacturers on changes to food product design, labelling, and packaging to support households to reduce food waste on a voluntary basis. According to WRAP, there has been positive progress by businesses on tackling food waste in the past year, but mandatory reporting is still required<sup>15, 16</sup>. Seventy percent of the companies that signed up to the Food Waste Reduction Roadmap were still not reporting data publicly in 2021<sup>17</sup>.

## THE UK GOVERNMENT'S FOOD AND DRINK WASTE HIERARCHY, AND THE NEED FOR MANDATORY REPORTING

There are policy inconsistencies in how the UK government is tackling food waste. One such inconsistency is the £750 million in subsidies provided to the anaerobic digestion industry annually. This has had the unintended consequence of

biogas digesters becoming a cheaper option for dealing with edible, surplus food than redistributing it to people, which goes against the government's own "Food and drink waste hierarchy" that stipulates that redistributing surplus food should be prioritised ahead of sending it for anaerobic digestion.

## The food waste redistribution conundrum

Redistributing surplus food rather than sending to landfill has both environmental and social positives and in the short-term food redistribution can provide immediate relief to those experiencing food poverty - experienced by 13.7 million people in the UK<sup>18, 19</sup>. Many UK retailers have policies in place to redistribute food waste to foodbanks, schools and other charities, typically indirectly through organisations such as FareShare<sup>20</sup>. However, food surplus charities and food banks are not a long-term, sustainable solution to the problem of food poverty. This requires action on the root causes of food poverty and policy solutions to address these causes, such as low incomes and the relative cost of healthy food. Retailer redistribution of food surplus is also criticised as a means through which companies can demonstrate CSR while avoiding being held accountable for tackling the structural problems that cause food waste in first place.

## Food waste reporting

Another inconsistency to note is around food waste reporting. The government is currently reconsidering its decision to scrap plans for mandatory food waste reporting. Campaigners, including Feedback, were seeking to legally challenge Defra's decision in the summer of 2023 to scrap the plans. Defra had claimed the cost of imposing mandatory reporting on businesses could drive up food prices and warned that plans for large companies to report annually on their food waste figures would lead to increased costs to business of almost £70m over 12 years. However, the government's own impact assessment found that food waste currently costs the UK £19bn per year, estimating that food waste measurement costs only an estimated £19/tonne measured, instead of an average £1,189- £3,099 savings/tonne of food waste reduced<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, all the evidence shows that the costs of introducing a mandatory requirement will be massively outweighed by savings, which would be achieved by reductions in food waste.

## *The Climate Change Committee have said that mandatory food waste reporting should have been introduced by 2022*

Furthermore, there was overwhelming support for mandatory reporting in Defra's official consultation: 99% of the respondents (including citizens and large businesses such as Tesco, Waitrose and Ocado)<sup>22, 23</sup> were in favour of mandating businesses to report food waste volumes<sup>24</sup>. Feedback challenged the consultation on the grounds the government's decision was not based on a reasonable or rational view of the evidence it received, and that the decision was based on an inadequate impact assessment, ignored advice from the government's own experts, and failed to take into account the GHGEs savings that would result from making food waste reporting mandatory. The Climate Change Committee have said that mandatory food waste reporting should have been introduced by 2022 in order for the UK to stay on the Balanced Net Zero Pathway. Government should introduce mandatory reporting for large food businesses to de-risk business investment in more healthy and sustainable food offerings, including a requirement for companies to report on food waste. Currently none of the three FDTP working groups are considering a consistent metric for reporting of food waste.

### Businesses should:

- Provide transparent data on food waste across their supply chain;
- Work to help citizens reduce food waste – strategies ought to include implementing clear and consistent date labelling and storage guidance, removing best before dates, improving freezing instructions and developing more appropriate pack sizes and formats – for example offering more loose produce<sup>25, 26</sup>;
- Commit to ensuring that unavoidable edible surplus food is tackled along the supply chain, with unavoidable surplus redistributed to people rather than being disposed of<sup>27</sup>.

### Businesses and investors should:

- Support mandatory reporting and the government's Food Data Transparency Partnership, advocating for the inclusion of a consistent metric for tracking food waste.
- Engage in collaborative industry initiatives such as WRAP's work on food waste and GHGEs to accelerate progress in supporting households to reduce food waste<sup>28</sup>.



### ENDNOTES

1. [The Food Foundation, July 2023](#)
2. [Feedback, July 2021](#)
3. [The National Food Strategy: The Plan, July 2021](#)
4. [Wrap, Action on Food Waste](#)
5. [The Food Foundation, July 2023](#)
6. [The Food Foundation, Veg Facts 2021](#)
7. [The Food Foundation, Veg Facts 2021](#)
8. United Nations Environment Programme (2021) Food Waste Index  
<https://wrap.org.uk/taking-action/food-drink/actions/action-on-food-waste>
9. [Feedback, September 2023](#)
10. [Feedback, September 2023](#)
11. with afforestation on the roughly 3 million hectares of grassland spared
12. [Feedback, September 2020](#)
13. [Feedback, September 2023](#)
14. [Feedback, Supermarket Food Waste Scorecard](#)
15. [Wrap, Progress Update 2023](#)
16. [The Grocer, 1 November 2023](#)
17. [Feedback, September 2023](#)
18. [FareShare, Policy Briefing: Tackling The Rising Cost Of Living Using England's Surplus Food, July 2023](#)
19. [The Food Foundation, Food Insecurity Tracking, June 2023](#)
20. [The Independent, 26 June 2021](#)
21. [Feedback, September 2023](#)
22. [The Grocer, 1 November 2023](#)
23. [Feedback, September 2023](#)
24. [The Grocer, 22 November 2023](#)
25. [Questa, T. and Luzecka, P. \(2014\). Household food and drink waste: A people focus](#)
26. [The Food Foundation, July 2023](#)
27. [Feedback, Supermarket Food Waste Scorecard](#)
28. [The Food Foundation, July 2023](#)