

# Candidate evidence

ADVANCED HIGHER HEALTH AND FOOD TECHNOLOGY PROJECT

## TO DETERMINE IF STATUTORY DATE CODES NEED TO BE REVIEWED

Candidate Number



1

**WORD COUNT: 4337**

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### **Literature Review**

Food labelling is regulated by Local Authority Trading Standards and Environmental Health Departments to protect consumers by ensuring accurate labelling information is provided to help consumers make informed food choices based on factors such as minimum durability, allergies and cost (1). It is a criminal offence to mislead consumers with inaccurate food labelling, whether it poses a food safety threat or not (1). A mandatory requirement of European legislation for pre-packed food labelling is the minimum durability or use by date (2)(3). Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011, Article 24, on the provision of Food Information to Consumers states, "In the case of foods which, from a microbiological point of view, are highly perishable and are therefore likely after a short period to constitute an immediate danger to human health, the date of minimum durability shall be replaced by the use by date. After the use by date a food shall be deemed to be unsafe" (2). This requires pre-packed foods to display date marks in the form of "best before" or "use by". These date marks are intended for consumers but are useful for stock rotation in food businesses. Food manufacturers must identify whether use by or best before dates are required taking into account factors such as storage conditions and intended use of the product (4).

Best before dates relate to food quality, not safety (5). Food quality relates to the acceptability of food to consumers and includes factors such as texture and flavour (5). This means food with best before dates will be safe to eat after this date, in terms of microbiological safety, but may not be of optimal quality, in terms of physical characteristics. The best before date is the date the manufacturer guarantees the food is of optimum quality (6). Best before dates are given to foods such as tinned, frozen and dried foods (beans, biscuits and dried pasta) (5). Provided food is stored in appropriate conditions, it will be safe to eat after the best before date but may not be of best quality (5). Best before dates should be considered a guide, rather than a strict rule. They often mislead the consumer into thinking the food is unfit to eat after this date which is estimated to cost households approximately £470 annually in wasted food (7).

Use by dates relate to food safety (5), and are allocated to high risk, microbiologically perishable foods such as meats and pre-packed salads (5). It is an offence to sell food past its use by date (9). For use by dates to be valid, storage conditions provided by

manufacturers must be followed (5); such as “keep refrigerated”. Food past the use by date could be unsafe to consume, even if it is stored correctly and looks and smells fine.

Pathogenic bacteria that cause food poisoning, such as Salmonella (common in poultry and eggs), Listeria (common in cooked meats) and Escherichia Coli (common in meat and unwashed vegetables), are invisible on food, nor can you taste or smell them (10). These pathogens are undetectable without a microscope (10).

Certain low risk, non-perishable foods with long shelf lives are exempt from best before or use by dates, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, vinegar and sugar (9).

2 million tonnes of UK food waste is discarded because it is not used in time; for a third of this, date labelling is cited as a factor (11). Most consumers do not understand the difference between best before and use by dates and it is documented that safe food is often discarded. Research shows 720 million eggs in the UK were discarded in 2018, despite having best before dates and not use by dates, suggesting some people do not understand the difference between date codes. The Guardian article states, “most people still don’t understand the difference” (10). WRAP, (Waste and Resources Action Programme) claims 30% of food disposed of for being ‘out of date’ actually had a best before date and could have been safe to eat (11). The confusion consumers have differentiating between best before and use by dates is exacerbated by additional voluntary indications, such as display until and sell-by dates and because of the confusion, edible food is discarded (12).

People treat best before dates as an indicator of food safety, rather than quality and edible food past its best before date is discarded. Terminology used in the past to describe best before dates such as “display until” and “sell by”, add to consumer confusion, resulting in good food being wasted (13). Confusion over date codes contributes to unnecessary food waste and it is important for consumers to understand food labels (14). If consumers understood date codes better, they could reduce food waste and save money (14). Tesco’s Head of Food Waste, Mark Little, said, “We know some customers may be confused by the difference between best before and use by dates on food and this can lead to perfectly edible items being thrown away before they need to be discarded.” Tesco have stopped using best before dates on many fruit and vegetable products aiming to reduce food waste

(15). Arla Foods UK undertook research suggesting 85% of adults find the difference between best before and use by dates confusing and Arla are replacing use by with best before dates on their brand of fresh milk in a bid to cut confusion and help reduce food waste (16)(17).

The Scottish Government has produced a food waste reduction action plan to reduce Scotland's food waste by 33% by 2025 as landfill waste contributes to climate change (13). The action plan states, "Extensive confusion about the meaning of different food product labelling leads consumers to prematurely dispose of significant amounts of food" (13). The plan aims to reduce food waste if consumers have clear, consistent food labels to help them understand when food is unsafe to eat (13).

Food manufacturers are responsible for determining the shelf life of products by using microbiological and sensory testing and following published guidelines (18). To protect their business, they may adopt an over cautious approach applying use by rather than best before dates, or they may shorten shelf lives, contributing to food waste. Manufacturers are often reluctant to extend shelf life using additives, such as preservatives and antioxidants, because consumers favour natural ingredients and products free from additives (19).

WRAP have produced labelling guidance following research that showed consumers valued labelling that helped them make better use of food rather than waste it. WRAP claim that by following their guidance, significant amounts of food waste thrown away on the basis of date codes will be reduced (20).

There is a voluntary agreement called the "Courtauld Commitment 2025" aiming to meet the United Nations goal of halving food waste by 2030 to make food and drink production and consumption more sustainable (21). Food businesses must understand date codes to minimise food waste which must be recycled under the Waste (Scotland) Regulations 2012 (22). This costs money. WRAP works with food businesses to reduce food waste by encouraging the monitoring date codes, stock control and portion sizes (21).

**Summary**

This literature review suggests some consumers are confused about date codes and do not understand the difference between use by and best before dates. Consequently, edible food is wasted unnecessarily contributing to climate change.

**Research Question** – Do date codes need to be reviewed?

**Objectives** – 1. To determine if date codes are necessary.  
2. To determine if consumers understand date codes.

**Research Plan**

**Research Technique 1: Questionnaire**

**Respondent descriptor: 100 randomly selected food shoppers, aged 18+, at Fife Supermarkets.**

Questionnaires collect qualitative data to help answer research objectives. Sample size should be over 20 to achieve a cross section of the target market to gather data providing valid, reliable and representative results. This research technique is inexpensive, quick and easy to conduct for researcher and respondents. It can be undertaken anywhere, requiring no special equipment other than the questionnaire and pen to record responses. More than 8 pertinent, closed questions should be asked to make interpretation easier. Closed questions ensure the questionnaire is quick and simple to complete as there are no extended responses to record which is time consuming. This questionnaire consisted of 12 closed questions.

**Research Technique 2: Interview**

**Interviewee- Service Manager – Environmental Health (Food and Workplace Health and Safety), Fife Council, Chartered Environmental Health Officer, REHIS President, (Appendix 1 & 2).**

Interviews ask 5-8 detailed questions. The interviewee is selected on the basis of their expertise being appropriate to the research objectives. The interviewees job title is recorded along with the questions and responses. Interviews are cheap and easy to conduct. No specialist equipment is required. Interviews can be conducted in person, via telephone, post or email making them a flexible, convenient method of collecting qualitative information. Interviews conducted in person are free flowing, providing detailed information, however this can be difficult to capture if responses are handwritten rather than audio recorded. Postal and email interviews allow the interviewee to consider responses prior to submission, improving accuracy of information and these methods save the interviewer time.

This interview consisted of 8 open, in-depth questions carefully constructed and focused on date codes to encourage extended responses. The interviewee was selected as being professionally qualified with many years' experience on the topic ensuring results are valid and reliable.

The interviewee requested to undertake the interview by email. Interview questions were emailed 27/11/19 and the responses were received 12/12/19.



**Questionnaire**

1. What is the main thing you consider when deciding if a food is safe to eat?

<b>Response</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Smell	9%
Correct storage	6%
Date codes	78%
Texture	2%
Taste	5%

2. Which of the following do you think is an indicator of food **safety**?

<b>Response</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Best before date	6%
Use by date	17%
Display until date	5%
Sell by date	6%
All the above	66%

3. Which of the following do you think is an indicator of food **quality**?

<b>Response</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Best before date	9%
Sell by date	8%
Use by date	14%
Display until date	9%
All the above	60%

4. If a label said “Use by 3 Jan 2020” what is the last date you would consider the food safe to eat?

<b>Response</b>	<b>(%)</b>
2 Jan 2020	6%
4 Jan 2020	64%
3 Jan 2020	22%
Depends on what the food looks like/what the food is	8%
Other	0%

5. If a label said “Best before 3 Jan 2020” what is the last date you would consider the food safe to eat?

<b>Response</b>	<b>(%)</b>
2 Jan 2020	6%
4 Jan 2020	72%
3 Jan 2020	20%
Depends on what the food looks like/what the food is	2%
Other	0%

6. Would you buy food if the **best before** date had expired?

<b>Response</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Yes	12%
No	80%
Don't Know	8%

7. Would you buy food if the **use by** date had expired?

Response	(%)
Yes	12%
No	88%
Don't know	0%

8. Which types of food do you think have a **use by** date?

Response	(%)
Biscuits, pasta, bread, frozen chicken	48%
Milk, chilled ready meals, pre-packed salad, cooked meat	51%
Don't know	1%

9. Which types of food do you think have a **best before** date?

Response	(%)
Biscuits, pasta, bread, frozen chicken	51%
Milk, chilled ready meals, pre-packed salad, cooked meat	48%
Don't know	1%

10. Which do you think can a shop can sell legally?

Response	(%)
Food past best before date	6%
Food past use by date	5%
Food past best before and use by date	0%
None of the above	84%
Don't know	5%

11. Would you eat food past its **best before** date?

Response	(%)
Yes	15%
No	75%
Maybe, depending on what it looked like/what the food was	8%
Don't know	2%

12. Would you eat food past its **use by** date?

Response	(%)
Yes	11%
No	86%
Maybe, depending on what it looked like/what the food was	3%
Don't know	0%

**INTERVIEW**

**Interviewee:** Service Manager – Environmental Health (Food and Workplace Health and Safety), Fife Council, Chartered Environmental Health Officer, REHIS President.

1. Is it a legal requirement to display a “best before” or “use by” date on food labelling?

“Yes, food law requires manufacturers of prepacked foods to provide a use by or a best before date under the Food Information (Scotland) Regulations 2014, which implement EU Regulation No 1169/2011.

Use by dates are about food safety, for highly perishable foods. This is the date the consumer should use the food by in order to ensure food safety. Food law assumes food is unfit after this date and it is a criminal offence to sell food beyond its use by date.

Best before dates are about food quality, for low risk prepacked foods. This is the date the manufacturer guarantees the food is of optimum quality. After this date, food may be safe, but the quality might have deteriorated. Food can be sold beyond the best before date, but the product must be safe and be of the nature, substance and quality demanded by the consumer, otherwise food law is contravened.”

2. Why do some food labels use the words “display until” and “sell by” date?

“These are voluntary dates used to assist with stock rotation in food businesses. Best before and use by dates are statutory requirements.”

3. Do you think **best before** date codes are necessary to protect the consumer and if so, why?

“Not necessarily. Best before dates relate to quality, not safety are not necessary to protect health but helps to ensure food is of optimum quality.”

4. Do you think **use by** date codes are necessary to protect the consumer and if so, why?

“Yes, they relate directly to food safety and protect consumers health. Use by dates are for highly perishable foods. Food with a use by date is safe until the use by date; after that it may be microbiologically unsafe and could cause food poisoning.”

5. Do you think **consumers** understand date codes? Please explain.

“Environmental Health Officers often receive enquiries or complaints from the public regarding food labelling, many relating to use by and best before dates. Sometimes, the public treat these dates as interchangeable, thinking it is illegal to sell food past its best before date. Officers advise consumers of the differences between date codes.”

6. Do you think **food businesses** understand date codes? Please explain.

“In general, food businesses do understand date codes because statistics show Officers have very few issues regarding use by offences.”

7. Do you think misunderstanding date codes results in increased food waste? Please explain.

“Definitely. Food past its best before date is often discarded when it is safe to eat but may not be of optimum quality. If consumers understood the difference between best before and use by dates, they would be confident to use their senses to help decide whether food past its best before date is edible. This would likely result in less good food going to waste.”

8. Do you think date codes need to be reviewed and made easier to understand by the consumer/food businesses? If so, how could this be achieved?

“I believe use by dates are essential to inform the consumer and food businesses when food must be consumed by, in order to protect consumer health, particularly since pathogenic microorganisms cannot be seen by the human eye and it is impossible to tell if food is contaminated or not. Best before dates are only a guide in relation to food quality and are not essential, however, are still legally required. Having two statutory date code terms may be confusing for the consumer. It may be beneficial to review this and better educate consumers.”

## Analysis

### **Issues identified from research:**

#### Some consumers do not understand date codes on pre-packed food labels

All research identified that some consumers misunderstand date codes, using them interchangeably and use both use by and best before dates as an indication of food safety. 66% of questionnaire respondents thought best before, use by, display until and sell by are all indicators of food safety. Only 17% correctly identified use by dates as an indicator of food safety. The literature review identified confusion and misunderstanding regarding date codes causing unnecessary food wastage. The interview corroborates this; the interviewee stated that the public treat date codes as interchangeable.

Both research techniques affirm information obtained from the literature review.

#### Most food businesses understand date codes

The interviewee stated that generally, food businesses do understand date codes based on statistics regarding use by offences. Businesses minimise food waste since they have to pay for it to be recycled; wasted food is wasted profit. This is a legal requirement identified in the literature review and waste reduction is a Scottish Government target, so it is in their best interests to understand date codes.

#### Most consumers consider date codes when deciding if food is safe to eat

The questionnaire shows 78% of respondents state date codes to be the main thing they consider when deciding if food is safe to eat. This indicates consumers think date codes are an important indicator of food safety and use it to determine the safety of food, rather than relying on their senses such as smell, texture or whether the food has been stored correctly.

This is good because both the literature review and the interviewee stated that use by dates relate directly to food safety. The literature review and interview identified that consumers cannot tell if a food is safe to eat as pathogenic bacteria, which cause food poisoning, cannot be seen.



Misunderstanding date codes results in edible food being wasted, contributing to climate change

The literature review and research both identified that best before dates are incorrectly used as an indication of food safety, causing food past its best before date to be discarded which may be safe to eat. Whilst only 6% of questionnaire respondents thought best before dates are an indicator of food safety, 66% and 60% respondents identified all date codes (best before, use by, sell by and display until) to be an indicator of food safety and food quality respectively. Only 12% respondents would consider buying food past its best before date. 12% would buy food past its use buy date and 11% would eat food past its use by date, which should both be 0%. This identifies a need for consumer education as this food may be hazardous to health as identified in the interview and literature review. This clearly demonstrates a misunderstanding of date codes. Only 17% correctly identified use by dates as an indicator of food safety and only 9% correctly identified best before dates as an indicator of food quality. The interviewee states that date codes are used interchangeably which is supported by the literature review. A study conducted by Arla Foods UK found that 85% of adults found the difference between best before and use by dates confusing. The questionnaire results reinforce this, with only 22% correctly identifying the last date food was safe to eat by its use by date and 98% thought food is only safe to eat the day before, the day of, or the day after the best before date, rather than looking at the food, using their senses to decide if the food is safe to eat, not realising best before dates relate to food quality and not food safety as stated in the literature review and highlighted by the interviewee as a consumer educational requirement.

The questionnaire identified that 48% consumers could not identify which types of food should have a best before or use by date. 1% did not know. Respondents could not distinguish between perishable foods which should have use by dates from lower risk foods which should have best before dates. Only 6% correctly identified that it is legal to sell food past the best before date, again demonstrating a misunderstand of date codes. Only 15% respondents would eat food past its best before date, indicating that the majority would discard this food which may be safe to eat, thereby contributing to excess food waste.

There is a definite need for a date informing the consumer when the food is safe to eat

Research identified that some form of date code is necessary but needs to be easier to understand for the consumer. The literature review identified legislation requiring date codes on pre-packed foods, either use by or best before. The interviewee stated a consumer protection requirement for use by dates as they relate directly to food safety on highly perishable foods which could cause food poisoning if eaten after the use by date has expired. The questionnaire found 78% respondents use date codes to decide if food is safe to eat, albeit there is a definite confusion over date codes currently in use as detailed above.

Date codes require to be reviewed and made easier to understand for the consumer

The literature review, questionnaire and interview all identify confusion and misunderstanding of date codes currently in use. The interviewee suggested a review of date codes may be beneficial. The literature review identified the need for clear, consistent food labels to help consumers decide when food is unsafe to eat. The questionnaire showed most consumers misunderstand date codes and use them incorrectly.

**Evaluation**

Research conducted was successful and consistent with the literature review.

The literature review consisted of recent, relevant and credible on-line articles providing information on date codes. This is good because the articles were easy to access and there was sufficient information to thoroughly review the topic, meaning that separate points of focused information were collected, referenced and were detailed enough to establish and answer the research question and objectives.

Suggested improvement - a broader, more in-depth literature review could be conducted using additional sources such as books and journals to gather more information.

The questionnaire obtained sufficient qualitative data which was easy to interpret without the use of complicated statistical analysis. The sample size of 100 made analysis of results easier. This is good, because it saved time and required no specialist analysis equipment such as computer programmes or mathematical or statistical techniques, meaning that the results could be easily compared with the literature review and interview and time could be better spent.

Question 1 could have been reworded as one of the responses, 'date codes', was ambiguous. This is bad, because it did not specify which date code in particular they consider when deciding if a food is safe to eat. This means that the response could be misinterpreted, showing that respondents know to consider date codes, however, it becomes evident from question 2 onwards that the date codes are generally misunderstood and used incorrectly by consumers.

Suggested improvement - the questionnaire could be done on a larger sample, covering a wider geographical area, to ensure increased reliability of results, making the findings more representative of the population. It may have been better to conduct the questionnaire using the free online application, Microsoft forms, to enable it to be done on a larger sample size in less time. This application may have made it easier to analyse results and take less time.

SurveyMonkey could be used in the future to create an online survey making data capture easier and open to more respondents via social media such as Facebook. However, this application was unsuitable for this project, as the questionnaire consisted of more than 10 questions and would incur costs.

A questionnaire/survey could be conducted with food businesses/manufacturers to determine how well they understand date codes, which would widen the scope of the project instead of restricting it to consumers.

The information obtained from the interview is reliable as the interviewee is an expert on the topic. This is good, because she has specialist training and knowledge on the topic, providing an accurate and valid reflection of the professional sector view, meaning that the information is accurate, non-biased and reliable, making the report more trustworthy and valid.

Suggested improvement - a face to face interview would be a more conversational, flexible, free flowing interview, providing opportunity for more extended responses and additional data capture, especially if conducted using audio recordings, giving the interviewer and interviewee freedom to fully explore the topic without interruption of writing down responses. Non-verbal cues could be interpreted in a face to face interview; therefore, the tone is more accurately conveyed.

Additional interviews could be conducted on other public health professionals, for example officials from Food Standards Scotland, other local authorities or the Scottish Food Liaison Groups, which would widen the scope of the report, thereby making the results more representative.

Further research could be aimed at food manufacturers, ensuring they are properly regulated to use the correct date code and prevent an over cautious approach by reducing shelf life or applying a use by date when a longer shelf life or a best before date may be appropriate.

The findings of this report could be forwarded to Food Standards Scotland in a bid to promote further research into date codes. Food labelling legislation is currently under review in relation to allergens following Food Standards Scotland consultation (23) and it has been suggested to incorporate the exercise required to burn off a food items calories onto the food label to help meet Government targets on obesity (24) so this is a good time to review date codes and make them easier for consumers to understand and help reduce food waste in line with Government targets and educate consumers in relation to food in general including safety, nutrition and cooking.

REHIS have shown great interest in this investigation and plan to publish the results with a view to further research.

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**Appendices:**

**Appendix 1-** Email attaching a letter requesting an interview and requesting permission from the interviewee to use job title, chartered status and President of REHIS role in report

Dear XXXX,

Thank you for offering to help me with my Advanced Health and Food Technology Project. I have attached a letter seeking your permission to use your job title in my report for the SQA. I have also attached 8 interview questions on date codes for you to answer if you have time. My report aims to find out if date codes need to be reviewed by determining whether consumers and businesses understand them.

Thank you very much for your time.

Kind regards,  
XXXXX

General Enquiries:  
Absence Line:

Service Manager  
Environmental Health  
Food, Workplace Health and Safety

28 November 2019

Dear

Advanced Higher Health and Food Technology Project

Interview regarding date codes on food labelling

I am a 6<sup>th</sup> year student at [redacted] currently studying Advanced Higher Health and Food for which I am required to submit a project. I have decided to do this on food labelling date marks. The aim is to find out if date marks on food labels require to be reviewed.

I write to ask if it would be possible for you to take part in a short interview with me at your convenience in order for me to find out more about date codes. Since your job title/position as a Service Manager in Environmental Health is central to the authenticity of the information your responses will provide me with, I seek permission from you to disclose this information in the report. I will not however disclose your name.

I look forward to hearing from you and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions,

Kind Regards



**Appendix 2-** interviewee email to confirm agreement to participate and permission to use name, job title, chartered status and President of REHIS role in report

Hi XXX,

Please see attached. I hope this helps with your project.  
I am happy for you to use my name, job title and Chartered EHO status if this aids your project.

Kind Regards  
XXXX

Service Manager - Environmental Health (Food & Workplace Safety)

Tel: XXXXX

Mobile: XXXXXX

Email: XXXXX

Environmental Health (Food & Workplace Safety), Economy, Planning & Employability Services,

[www.facebook.com/EHFife](http://www.facebook.com/EHFife)

[www.twitter.com/EHFife](http://www.twitter.com/EHFife)

Privacy Statement:

[http://www.fifedirect.org.uk/privacy/EH\\_FWPS](http://www.fifedirect.org.uk/privacy/EH_FWPS)