

# the big question

## What's in your bin?

Whether it is banana skins, potato peelings or that last mouthful of dinner you couldn't quite clear from the plate, food waste is costing families and council taxpayers the earth.

In the hectic whirlwind of modern life, it is hard to know how much food to buy, to plan meals and to cut back on waste. Of course, we should still try. Indeed, efforts abound to help families make their weekly shop go further. Inevitably some food will always end up in the bin - but does it have to rot in the ground?

Many councils are now giving residents a separate bin for their food waste. Leftovers are being turned into fertiliser, or gas to generate electricity. In some areas, in-vessel composting and anaerobic digestion are playing a key role in cutting council spending on landfill tax and reducing methane emissions.

This role could be far bigger though. A lack of infrastructure is holding back the drive to make getting rid of food waste cheaper and greener. Councils do not want to collect leftovers without somewhere to send them, but nobody wants to build the places to send food waste until it is being collected. Town halls will continue working with investors and the private sector to break this impasse.

A bigger task is to get the public's backing for these technologies. There is still much misunderstanding about how safe and clean anaerobic digestion and in-vessel composting now are. Nobody likes the idea of rubbish being sent to their neighbourhood but local leaders need to redouble their efforts to convince people that turning food waste into something useful is a clean, efficient and, above all, frugal way of dealing with the food we leave on our plates.



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For the past year, our 'average' family of four has been striving valiantly to decrease the amount in our bin. We have employed such strategies as increasing recycling, growing our own vegetables and purchasing a wormery through the council's subsidised programme. We have managed to reduce the amount of waste we send to the landfill to just a single thirteen gallon bin bag. But there we have stuck.

I have read all the literature about the three R's: reduce, re-use and recycle. We do amazingly well at re-using old furniture, clothes and even food. My blog extols the virtues of Freecycle, charity shops and leftovers. But when it comes to reducing, the battle is tough.

One of the biggest contributors to our bin bag is packaging. Council literature suggested that purchasing fruits and vegetables loose was cheaper and reduced the amount of plastic that makes its way into the bin, so I tried it one week. I used a bag for life to hold all my loose produce until we reached the check out. I found that it actually added a couple of pounds to our weekly shopping bill, which would have been over one hundred pounds in a year, the equivalent to a gas bill.

The most frustrating part of this battle is that essentially it is beyond our control. Why does a four pack of baked beans, which saves our family over twenty pence, require an extra layer of plastic wrap that is not even recyclable? Could the store not just as easily tag the item forty pence for one or four for one-pound forty? Disappointingly, it seems the 'average' consumer is at the mercy of the stores and producers.



## Sue Dibb

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'Eat up; think of the starving children in Africa!' This was the moral mealtime message drilled into my in childhood memory by parents who themselves had endured wartime rationing. Today, I'm more concerned my kids don't overeat on the 'wrong' foods, than ensuring they eat every last morsel. But I'm still concerned about waste in the food system.

It's a staggering statistic that we throw away a third of our food. Around half of that is peelings and other inedible waste – but it is still too much. WRAP's Love Food Hate Waste campaign is successfully raising awareness but more needs to be done to reduce unnecessary waste and make use of that which is unavoidable.

My vegetable patch is the beneficiary of my kitchen compost – but that only disposes of the fruit and veg peelings. My two chickens happily eat unused bread, rice and pasta and we get delicious eggs in return. I thought the answer to recycling the rest of our kitchen waste was a kit that promised to compost cooked foods, meat leftovers, fish bones etc. by sprinkling on a magic mixture. But the unsuccessful result was a sludgy undigested mess that ended up in the dustbin.

Anaerobic digestion provides the technology to turn food waste into biogas, a renewable energy source for heat, power, transport and biofertiliser. It keeps organic waste out of landfill, reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It's time every local authority collected household food waste – where I live in Brighton and Hove, despite our green credentials, we don't yet have this service. Anaerobic digestion is common in other European countries, but here we're still largely trialling this technology. With statutory commitments to reduce the UK's GHG emissions by 34% by 2020, faster action on food waste must be a priority for government, local authorities, businesses and individual householders.

My household doesn't generate much rubbish. The wheelie bin outside only gets emptied every 6 weeks or so. It usually contains wood ash from the stove, margarine tubs and yoghurt pots, plastic film (if it's got food on it) and occasionally broken toys or other things I can't recycle or reuse.

Ever since I was small I've been fascinated by the decomposition process of organic matter. As a child I'd line up jam jars of organic matter – bread, meat, cheese – and watch over the weeks as the bacteria and fungi developed. As I've got older that fascination has, if anything, become even stronger. I've become more aware of our planet's unique existence in this universe, and our place within the Earth's ecosystem. I want to help ensure we'll still be here for generations to come, and closing the loop is one way I can do that.

When I moved to this house in 2001, I started a compost heap – now I've got 34! I teach people to compost, whatever their circumstances. I'm on a mission to reconnect people with their food, and show them how easy it is to turn it into useful material. People have lost the ability to use their judgement about when food is off, and when it's still ok to eat.

Some might say that composting a few crumbs of bread is a drop in the ocean. I'd reply that every drop counts.



## John Cossham

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## What's in your bin?

“Use-by dates and their absurd companions ‘sell-by’ and ‘best before’... are just a marketing scam, intended to persuade us to throw away perfectly good food so we have to buy more.”

Those are the dangerous words of TV chef Clarissa Dickson-Wright.

‘Use-by’ dates are required by European law and vital to preventing illness or even death from eating unsafe food.

Food and Environment Secretary Hilary Benn doesn’t appear to be suggesting scrapping those, but his speech at the Packaging Strategy launch was widely interpreted as meaning a possible end for ‘best-before’, ‘sell-by’ or ‘display-until’.

He said, “I want to improve the labels on our food so that... we know exactly how long it’s safe to eat.”

Certainly, some customers aren’t clear about what the different dates mean but getting rid of them won’t reduce food waste. Customer education will.

In fact the current regime makes it absolutely clear when food’s safe to eat. That’s what a ‘use-by’ date is for and the others also have important jobs to do.

The ‘best before’ date is generally about food quality. ‘Display-until’ dates help store staff to manage stocks.

Removing those two could actually increase waste. It would be harder for stores to ensure food that’s no longer top quality (but is still perfectly safe) isn’t out on sale.

Retailers are already working with Government to improve understanding and to help customers make better decisions about buying, storing and using food at home. That’s where the solution lies.



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What’s in my bin – and yours – is much less food waste than there would be if our packaging and distribution system was not as sophisticated and technologically advanced as it is. Twenty years ago there would have been roughly the same amount of packaging in our bins, generated by far fewer goods. That’s because the supply chain has focused on providing better protection for products, but doing so with far fewer resources and less packaging material.

Packaging has also responded to changes in lifestyle – for example mums working outside the home with less time for home cooking; more people living alone and needing smaller portions – in a way that few other industry sectors have done.

Wasting food is shameful, not least because 50% of the energy in the food supply system is used to grow and process food. Just 10% is used to make the packaging which prevents that investment going to waste.

The public are very aware of packaging after it has done its job and is in their bins. However, not only has it already prevented far more waste than it ever generates but over 80% of packaging can easily be recycled, so should not be in their bins at all. The other 20% is thin, lightweight material, often with food residues. This is better left in with the other non-recyclable waste and treated for energy recovery.

Food packaging actually has a net positive environmental impact.

## What's in your bin?



## Julia Hailes MBE

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Households in the UK throw away about seven million tonnes of food waste. If you add that to food waste from farms, food processing and catering we're chucking away a massive 24 million tonnes a year. And most of this is currently going to landfill.

There's a lot of public concern about food packaging and whether it's recyclable or recycled. But what many people fail to realise is that wasting food is far worse. In fact, on average the climate change impact of this is about 10 times worse than wasteful packaging. Around 20% of climate change emissions directly relate to the production, processing, transportation and storage of food – and yet we throw away about one third of the food we buy.

Clearly, we should be doing a lot more to use up the food we buy. But once it is discarded there are a whole lot more issues to worry about. Many councils, including in Somerset where I live, have set up separate collections for food waste – ours is collected in a brown bucket.

Not long ago I went to see what happens once it's been taken away. I discovered that it's being composted on a vast scale and the rich, fertile soil is then sold on to gardeners. That's great, but even better is anaerobic digestion (AD), which is just beginning to take off in the UK.

We need to reduce the amount of food that is wasted. But whatever we do throw away should be put to good use – let's give the thumbs up to AD and to separate food waste collection schemes.

There is a long-held belief that food packaging waste is the main reason that UK landfill sites are almost full. However, it is not just packaging that gets buried – it is also the final destination for most of the 6.7m tonnes of food thrown away by households. The growing, transporting and storing of this wasted food accounts for 2% of all of the UK's carbon emissions.

Food waste has an impact on our pockets too, with over £600 a year added to the average family budget. That cost is largely avoidable, as most of the food is discarded due to incorrect or over-long storage. For our pockets and the planet, the priority should be to eat the food we buy.

This is why we believe packaging, product by product, must be examined as part of our efforts to cut food waste.

We found that wrapping individual peppers in plastic has no impact on freshness or quality so we stopped it. But wrapping cucumbers means that they last five times longer. Sensible packaging helps prevent food waste.

Supermarkets must help consumers understand better how to keep and store food too.

We've introduced 'Best Kept advice' stickers on fresh food. It advises, for example, the two-thirds of consumers who don't realise that apples stay fresh for up to 14 days longer if kept in a fridge.

We must tackle the confusion over 'best by' and 'use by' dates. One in two consumers say they unnecessarily throw away food when it reaches 'best by' date.

No matter how many steps we make, there will always be some waste. But to move towards zero waste to landfill we need an improved national infrastructure for collection and guidelines to use it productively. Our focus now – and in the future – remains on reducing packaging and food waste.



## Richard Taylor

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## What's in your bin?

Before City Harvest was founded, there was no system in place to rescue excess food in New York. In the early '80s, soup kitchens here were struggling to serve the growing number of people in need. Meanwhile, only blocks away, restaurants and bakeries were discarding unserved food.

A volunteer named Helen Palit was eating a potato skin appetizer one evening at a restaurant near the soup kitchen where she worked. She asked the chef what he did with the insides of the potatoes. When he said that he threw them away, Helen told him that her soup kitchen could use whatever he was able to give. The next day he donated 30 gallons of cooked potatoes. Within three months other local retailers and were donating unused food to the kitchen.

She founded City Harvest in December 1982, recruiting and training volunteers to handle the food safely and coordinating deliveries through a hotline. Since then City Harvest has rescued 269 million pounds of food.

The food businesses that generously donate are protected by New York State's Good Samaritan Law, which shields those making "good faith" donations of food from liability. Food safety is at the core of our work. We have refrigerated trucks to keep food properly chilled, and we make sure recipient agencies have Health Department-approved facilities. We have simple food packaging guidelines for donors to follow, and we provide a limited amount of packaging for food donors. Each donor gets a receipt.

Since our founding, we've helped launch food rescue programmes in Germany, England, India, South Africa, Brazil, Israel, and elsewhere. Visitors from all over the world have come to study our work and take back ideas for solving their own hunger problems.



### Jilly Stephens

**Executive Director, leads City Harvest's efforts to rescue food for hungry New Yorkers and the development and implementation of programmes in low-income communities to address hunger's underlying causes.**

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### Peter Jones OBE

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At last, what's in my bin and what happened to it before it got there is under sustained study in terms of resource efficiency conversion.

This supply chain is responsible for an estimated fifth of the UK carbon footprint, and uncomfortably much of the wastage in the system is self inflicted. This is a result of single minded conceptions of 'progress' in terms of sell by dates, size, shape, cleanliness and orderliness.

Cradle to grave approaches are essential when considering the overall carbon entropy from farm to fork but there is growing realisation that waste by-product at all stages is inevitable. In terms of the input-output ratios, the numbers can no doubt be improved upon – 30 million tonnes of all food and drink is consumed each year with around seven million tonnes ending up in household bins. That's an attitudinal issue.

The rest, around a further 15 million tonnes of process, catering, agricultural product, is under attack. The threat of incipient electrical supply capacity constraints (due to off-lining life expired coal and nuclear), sharp increases in the cost of gas, and landfill gate fees moving from £7 per tonne to £100 over 15 years to 2011, are all producing interest in co-located conversion of scrap food carbon into fossil energy, displacing heat, power and gas. Anaerobic digesters are first out of the gate, but look out for food to hydrogen, ingredients refining and other more exotic options as technologies become bankable.

As ever the greatest problems create the greatest opportunities!