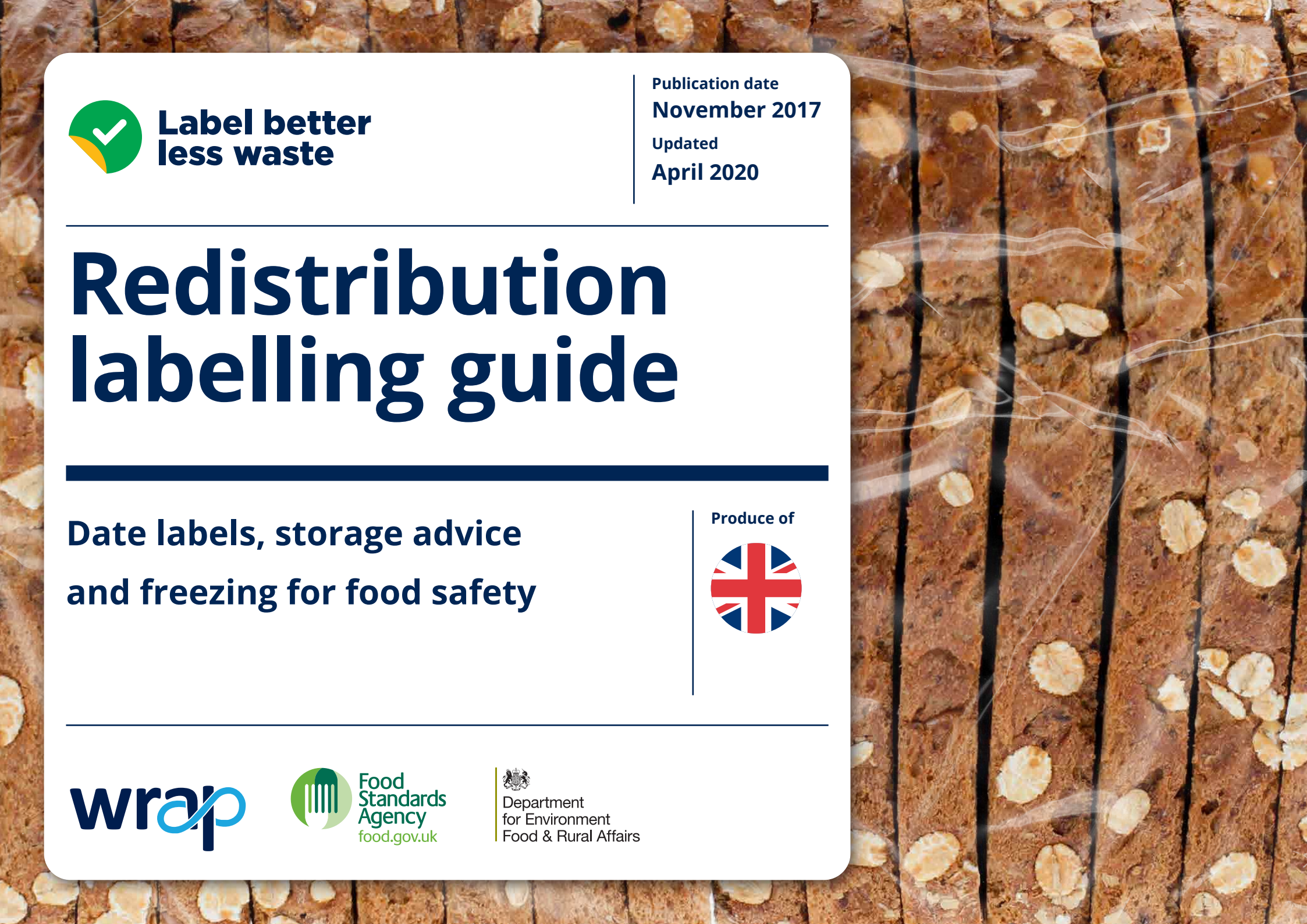


Label better less waste

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Redistribution labelling guide

Date labels, storage advice and freezing for food safety

Produce of

wrap

Food Standards Agency
food.gov.uk

Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

Introduction

This summary document covers date labelling and storage instruction requirements for surplus food, in order for it to be safely redistributed.

Context to this information can be found in WRAP's Best Practice Labelling Guidance. The key requirements are covered in this document and a checklist that can be incorporated into an organisation's processes and operations is also available. The scope of this summary covers manufacturing, retail and supplier businesses, and all types of redistribution organisations.

Food labelling and safety requirements

Any operation handling food on a regular basis with a degree of organisation would be considered a food business and must be registered and comply with the relevant food law.

This means that all food businesses supplying, receiving or handling redistributed food must also make themselves aware of their legal responsibilities and comply with the relevant food legislation.

Food placed on the market (effectively offered for supply or sale) must be safe; this is regardless of whether that food supply is for profit or not, or whether food is sold or given away.

Small-scale or irregular events, or organisations where food is supplied which do not require registration, for example an annual one-off church fete, must still place safe food on the market.

When surplus food is collected or received by the redistribution organisation it is then their responsibility to keep it safe – to make sure it is transported, stored and, if relevant, cooked properly. Organisations should ensure their volunteers and staff have the appropriate food hygiene training.

All food businesses, including charities, are required to put in place and maintain a food safety management system based on the principles of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP)[1]. The system can be adapted to the nature of the food business, but charities are still required to ensure that all steps are put in place to prevent a hazard causing a risk to the safety of the food.

1 For example see https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/hazard-analysis-and-critical-control-point-haccp

Date labels and handling

Date labels

The **'Use By'** date relates to food safety. Food **cannot** be sold, redistributed or consumed after this date. The only exception to this is if the food has gone through a safe freezing or cooking process, before the 'Use By' date has passed, and has been appropriately re-labelled.

The 'Best Before' date relates to food quality. Food with a 'Best Before' date **can** be sold, redistributed and consumed after this date. Providing food is stored in appropriate conditions – i.e. as instructed on the label by the manufacturer – and has not become otherwise contaminated, it will be safe to consume for a period of time after the 'Best Before' date has passed, but it may not be at its best.

Transport and storage

Chilled food which is redistributed needs to be handled, transported and stored safely and stored at the correct temperature whilst awaiting collection. The party collecting and /or receiving the food must ensure that it is handled and transported under appropriate conditions[2]. They must also be aware of the date label on the products to ensure that appropriate action can be taken so that food with a short time left on it is distributed to:

- be consumed immediately;
- undergo some form of processing (i.e. cooking) before consumption or freezing; or
- be frozen (and if carrying a 'Use By' date, re-labelled), if not previously frozen.

Food that is past its 'Use-By' date should never be presented to any person or organisation (regardless of whether they are a charity or business), and if this does occur the food must not be made available for people to buy or eat. Depending on the food and the infrastructure available such food should be recycled or disposed of.

2 Food can be left out of temperature control for short periods of time for practical purposes, but this must be done safely. Any time outside of the recommended storage temperature should be minimised.

Products with a ‘Best Before’ date

This guidance for Food Business Operators (FBOs), including redistribution organisations, outlines a set of simple redistribution considerations for four categories of food that typically have a ‘Best Before’ date applied[3]:

- Uncut fresh produce[4];
- Bread and bakery;
- Ambient products (cans, jars, packets, bottles); and
- Frozen products.

These considerations are outlined in Table 1.

The aim here is to help FBOs understand and make use of food labelling in a way that is compliant with food regulations and ensures that more food can be consumed as intended rather than wasted.

Covid-19

Pressures on food supply resulting from the Covid-19 outbreak make it essential for UK food businesses to work as efficiently as possible to get food to people in need. All food that is unsold and “surplus” in the supply chain but still safe to eat should be redistributed for human consumption, ahead of using it in animal feed or sending it to a waste management route such as anaerobic digestion. **There is a legal obligation for businesses to consider the food surplus and waste hierarchy when assessing what to do with surplus food.**

Some food businesses and redistribution organisations have previously decided against donating or accepting food products that are past or close to their ‘Best Before’ date (although still of good quality and safe to eat), whilst others have taken a more flexible approach.

This section of the guide has been produced through the work of the Courtauld 2025 Redistribution Working Group, and has been published in April 2020 to help with short-term decision- making. The guidance may therefore be expanded in the future. It is not intended to be legally binding or prescriptive, but to encourage more food surplus to be utilised.

This document seeks to minimise this waste of good food by providing guidance on determining whether products are fit to eat and redistributable after their ‘Best Before’ date. All food businesses and redistribution organisations are urged to implement this guidance and redistribute all safe-to-eat food where possible.

This guidance does not apply to foods labelled with a ‘Use By’ date. These foods cannot be supplied, must not remain on the market, and should not be consumed after the ‘Use By’ date.

3 There are specific regulations relating to hens’ eggs which require the use of a ‘Best Before’ date on egg packaging, which should be fixed at not more than 28 days after laying. They must also be sold within 21 days of laying. **Food Standards Agency advice is that eggs should not be used past the ‘Best Before’ date unless fully cooked, and then only 1-2 days after the ‘Best Before’ date.**

4 Pre-packed uncut fresh produce is increasingly sold without a date mark, but many packs do still carry a Best Before label. See here for guidance from WRAP on the labelling of pre-packed uncut fresh produce.

Products with a ‘Best Before’ date (cont’d)

Key principles

Food with a ‘Best Before’ date can legally be sold or redistributed, and consumed after this date. FBOs, including redistribution organisations, like individual consumers, are able to make a reasonable judgment on whether or not the food can be sold, donated & made available to be eaten.

It is important to note that we are not advocating that substandard food should be redistributed. It is an offence for a person to sell or supply food which does not meet food safety requirements, or which is not of the ‘nature, substance or quality’ expected by the consumer. Food redistributors should have a system in place (based on HACCP principles) so that food is disposed of (as appropriate waste) if it is no longer of the nature, substance or quality required, to protect the FBO from supplying illegal food.

More information on the meaning of ‘Best Before’ is outlined in Appendix A.

Implementation guidance

FBOs **(including retailers, manufacturers, hospitality and food service businesses, distributors and redistributing organisations)** should agree in principle that foods past their ‘Best Before’ dates can be redistributed, and the associated durations where the food is likely to remain acceptable.

These same organisations should then carry out assessments as to whether products past their ‘Best Before’ dates can be redistributed, based on checks for freshness and damage for example, before they are released to redistributors or passed on to end users. This should include a visual inspection to ensure acceptable nature, substance or quality expected by the consumer and also that the products are free from damage. In some instances, torn or damaged outer cases may be acceptable but the integrity of the primary pack itself must be maintained.

Food safety should never be compromised. Foods with a ‘Use By’ date cannot be supplied, must not remain on the market, and should not be consumed after this date.

Allergen information must always be provided where legally required[5].

Redistributors (and end-users) can work with food retailers and manufacturers to agree:

- The acceptable duration beyond ‘Best Before’ dates for different products (example durations are given in this guidance, to be used as a basis to inform what is agreed).
- That the necessary checks have been carried out to ensure products are of sufficient quality and free from damage (as outlined above).

An example form that can be used to implement this is provided in Appendix B - Agreement to supply/ receive food past ‘Best Before’ date.

5 See https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/allergen-information-for-prepacked-for-direct-sale-food

Products with a ‘Best Before’ date (cont’d)

Implementation guidance (cont’d)

Redistribution organisations and recipient organisations should perform their own visual inspections before food is used as a meal ingredient. This final check ensures that food past its Best Before date is of sufficient quality.

The indicative durations where the food is likely to remain acceptable, past the Best Before date (provided in Table 1 and the associated form Appendix B) are examples based on experiences from Courtauld 2025 signatory organisations. These can be adapted to suit the needs of the individual redistribution organisations, working to the overall principle that underpins this guidance: that all surplus food that is safe to eat is redistributed, where possible.

Further/related guidance

WRAP has developed a Framework intended to help individual providers and recipients to adopt or adapt their own processes and choices for handling surplus food, to fit with existing ways of working, while making it easier for multiple organisations to work with each other. This guidance can be found here.

Further guidance on redistribution and respective responsibilities can be found here.

Table 1 - Guidance for specific product types

Category	Labelling	Redistribution
Fresh produce (uncut)	There is no legal requirement for fresh, uncut fruit and vegetables[6] to have any date label[7]- and many products do not carry one, or are sold loose.	Pack formats: loose or packed (in bags, trays/punnets and flowrap, etc.) For both loose and packed fresh produce **there are no uniform dates on when such products would still be of sufficient quality after their 'Best Before' date** (where such dates are on packs). Their suitability for consumption is likely to depend on factors like the food type, the variety, seasonality, and the nature of the individual item. This may mean that the f**ood may remain of a sufficient quality for use for a range of 1 day** (for a more perishable items, such as berries) **to 2 weeks or more** after the 'Best Before' date (for a more robust item – such as a swede). Most fruits and vegetables will stay fresher for longer when stored in a fridge below 5^{0}C and if pre-packed, kept in their original packaging. Visual check: confirm absence of moulds or rotting.
Bread and bakery (incl. morning goods; world breads) **[Ambient only, not chilled; for Cakes see section below]**	Many retailers have in-store bakeries and will sell bread and other baked items loose. Such stores bake daily and will remove unsold items at the end of trading. However, the majority of bread and bakery items for immediate consumption are sold pre-packed and carry a 'Best Before' date on the packaging.	Packed bread and bakery products **will remain of a sufficient quality to eat for a range of 2 day**s (most packed bread) **to up to a 1 week after the 'Best Before' date on packaged items.** Bakery products should be visually inspected for quality, especially for the presence of mould (samples may need to be opened to allow this inspection). If mould is present, the food should not be redistributed. S**ome bakery items are sold in long life packaging** (e.g. some pitta breads). These items retain quality e**nabling them to be eaten for a considerably longer period after the 'Best Before' date has passed** (this may be a month or longer, but visual judgement will be required in foods that can support mould growth). **See the example for Cakes below.**

6 Fresh fruit and vegetables, including potatoes, which have not been peeled, cut or similarly treated are exempt from carrying a date label.
7 https://www.wrap.org.uk/content/uncut-packed-fruit-and-vegetable-date-labelling-guidance

Table 1 - Guidance for specific product types (cont'd)

<table>
<tr><th>Category</th><th>Labelling</th><th>Redistribution</th></tr>
<tr><td>Ambient</td><td>Ambient includes a wide range of food that is found in cans, jars and packets. Typically such food carries a 'Best Before End' date and has a long shelf life.</td><td>There are many examples of organisations redistributing ambient items for a long period after the 'Best Before' date has passed. In each case there is a precedent of working with the manufacturer to obtain an extension certificate based on assurances about food safety and quality[8].
<table>
<tr><th>Pack type</th><th>Product</th><th>Extended life beyond 'Best Before'</th><th>Additional checks prior to redistribution</th></tr>
<tr><td>Packet</td><td>Crisps</td><td>1 month</td><td>Visual check: confirm absence of staleness; confirm pack integrity maintained.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Packet</td><td>Cake</td><td>3 months</td><td>Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Packet</td><td>Biscuits/Cereals</td><td>6 months</td><td>Visual check: confirm pack integrity.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Packet</td><td>Dried pasta and pulses</td><td>3 years</td><td>Visual check: confirm pack integrity.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Canned foods</td><td>Soup/Beans/Fish/Meat/etc.</td><td>3 years</td><td>Visual check: confirm pack integrity is maintained and can is free from dents.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Foil pack</td><td>Dry pasta/Soup mix/etc.</td><td>3 years</td><td>Visual check: confirm pack integrity.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Jars</td><td>Jams/Condiments/Sauces</td><td>3 years</td><td>Visual check: confirm integrity of seal and jars free from damage.</td></tr>
</table></td></tr>
<tr><td>Frozen</td><td>On the packaging of frozen food there is an indicative guide stating how long the food can be stored using freezers of a given star rating, for optimal quality. The products are usually labelled 'Best Before End'.</td><td>If items have been stored frozen at the FBO in accordance with regulations, they will be safe to eat for months after the 'Best Before End' date. In some cases (for example frozen pork cuts, minced pork products, pizzas with ham and pepperoni, kippers and mackerel) it would be advisable to confirm any potential to donate food after the 'Best Before End' date with the manufacturer (as these products are more likely to be affected by changes in taste even when frozen).

The star-rating storage life reflects the length of time the product is likely to remain in good condition. Eventually, even well-frozen food will deteriorate and become unpalatable, whilst still remaining safe to eat.

Where frozen food is donated, FBOs, redistribution organisations and others will require appropriate freezer capacity to ensure the food is retained at the correct temperature until it is defrosted for use.</td></tr>
</table>

8 Unwashed/unpeeled root veg and other uncleaned soil-grown produce should be washed before placing in refrigerator (or stored below ready to eat items) to prevent potential transference of microbiological contamination.

Frozen foods guidance

Freezing food

Freezing can act as a 'pause button' prior to the date on the food passing. Some businesses and redistribution organisations are able to freeze foods prior to their 'Use By' or 'Best Before' dates, before the food is transferred to a redistribution organisation or final recipient.

The organisation carrying out the freezing must:

- Ensure that the food is in an acceptable condition and suitable for freezing (e.g. as indicated by manufacturer's instructions).
- Ensure the food is frozen all of the way through to the core.
- Supply information relating to the food and its freezing to the receiving organisation – include information about when the product was frozen and instructions for defrosting and cooking.
- Re-label the food (see below).
- For food carrying a 'Use By' date, demonstrate that the freezing process commenced early enough to ensure that that the food is frozen by or before midnight of the day of the expiry of the 'Use By' date.[9]

Re-labelling food that is frozen

If food is frozen to facilitate redistribution, it is essential that the food is re-labelled as the nature of the product will have changed, and frozen food with an expired 'Use By' date found in a food business establishment is deemed unsafe by virtue of food law.

Therefore, food has to be frozen prior to its expiry date, the original 'Use By' (if the product had one) removed and a new 'Best Before' date applied. Food operations storing re-labelled food should have systems in place to record when the food was frozen as they could be asked to demonstrate that such food is safe when inspected by Local Authority Food Safety Officers.

Instructions for use should be provided which make it clear that the product should be thawed under refrigeration and used within 24 hours.

9 Ideally, the freezing process should commence early enough so that the food reaches at least -2°C at midnight of the day of the expiry of the 'Use By' date. While the food may not be fully frozen at midnight, there should be no risk to food safety if the freezing process is underway early enough before that time, with the aim of freezing the food through to the core.

Appendix A
Meaning of 'Best Before'

The term 'Best Before' is used on the vast majority of foods. It indicates the period for which a food can reasonably be expected to retain its optimal condition (e.g. bread will not be stale) and so relates to the quality of the food[8]. 'Best Before' dates are set by retailers and food manufacturers after rigorous testing.

Providing food is stored in appropriate conditions, as instructed on the label by the manufacturer, and has not become otherwise contaminated, it will be of sufficient quality (and of course, completely safe) to consume for a period of time following the passing of a 'Best Before' date, but it may not be at its absolute best.

It is permissible to sell or redistribute food after the 'Best Before' date provided it is not unsafe (i.e. it must be fit for human consumption and not injurious to health).

Types of 'Best Before' labels

'Best Before' labels generally consist of the words 'Best Before' or 'Best Before End' and either the date itself, or a reference to where the date is given on the label or the pack. Sometimes the abbreviations 'BB' or 'BBE' are used.

- For foods expected to keep for 3 months or less the words 'Best Before' may be followed by just the day and month.
- For foods expected to keep for more than 3 months but no longer than 18 months the date label may be given in the form 'Best Before End' and just the month and year.
- For foods expected to keep for more than 18 months the date label may be shown as 'Best Before End' followed by just the year only.

Dates can be presented in number format or a mix of letters and numbers.

Frozen food (food sold frozen, in this case) will also carry a 'Best Before' label, generally 'Best Before End', but may be accompanied by a 'Star' rating or similar. This rating indicates the storage temperature, for example 1 star (-6 degrees centigrade) may be sufficiently cold to keep food frozen for three or four days while 4 stars (below 18 degrees centigrade) means that the freezer storage provides the ideal conditions for freezing for much longer time frames.

There may be circumstances where a 'Display Until' date is used alongside or instead of a 'Best Before' date. WRAP does not recommend this practice as there is evidence that some consumers do not understand the difference between the legally required date labels and those used by food businesses for stock control purposes. This can mean that food which is safe to eat is thrown away unnecessarily. 'Display Until' labels can be ignored by redistribution organisations and consumers.

Appendix B -
Agreement to supply/receive food past the 'Best Before' date'[10]

Food surplus redistribution

Agreement to supply / receive food past 'Best Before' date

Name of organisation supplying surplus product: .....

Key contact name and contact details: .....

Signature: ..... **Date:** ...../...../.....

All or some of this product is close to, or past the 'Best Before' or 'Best Before End' date. The product/s is/are safe to consume, providing any on-pack handling, storage and usage instructions are followed.

All products have been visually inspected to confirm they are of sufficient quality and that critical packaging integrity is maintained (e.g. an outer cardboard box could be damaged, but the primary inner packaging is intact). Please refer to the table below for guidelines on length of product extension and checks required to determine products are sufficient quality.

Pack type	Product	Extended life beyond 'Best Before'	Additional checks prior to redistribution*
Packed	Fresh produce **Uncut/ Unprocessed**	1- 14 days (dependent on produce type)	Visual check: confirm absence of moulds or rotting.
Packet	Bread and Bakery	1 week	Visual check: confirm absence of moulds or staleness.
Packet	Crisps	1 month	Visual check: confirm absence of staleness; confirm pack integrity maintained.
Packet	Cake	3 months	Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained.
Packet	Frozen food	3-6 months**	Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained.
Packet	Biscuits /Cereals	6 months	Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained.
Packet/ Bar	Confectionery	12 months	Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained.
Packet	Dried pasta and pulses	12 months	Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained.
Cans	Soup/ Beans/ Fish / Meat. etc	3 years	Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained and cans are free from dents.
Foil Pack	Dry pasta/ Soup mix. etc.	3 years	Visual check: confirm pack integrity maintained.
Jars	Jams/ Condiments/ Sauces	3 years	Visual check: confirm integrity of seal and jars free from damage.

NB: These are guidelines and the table is not exhaustive.

* Sample packs may need to be opened to carry out a visual inspection (e.g. for mould).

** If items have been stored frozen at the Food Business Operator (FBO) in accordance with on-pack instructions, they will be safe to eat for months after the 'Best Before End' date. In some cases (for example frozen pork cuts, minced pork products, pizzas with ham and pepperoni, kippers and mackerel) it would be advisable to confirm any potential to donate food after the BBE date with the manufacturer (as these products are more likely to be affected by changes in taste even when frozen). The star-rating storage life reflects the length of time the product is likely to remain in good condition. Eventually, even well-frozen food will deteriorate and become unpalatable, whilst still remaining safe to eat. Where frozen food is donated, FBOs, redistribution organisations and others will require appropriate freezer capacity to ensure the food is retained at the correct temperature until it is defrosted for use.

These guidelines are strictly for products with a 'Best Before'/ 'Best Before End' expiry date, and **not to be used for products labelled with a 'Use By' date**. All other labelling is to be compliant to European Food Information to Consumers Regulation No 1169/2011 (FIC).

The food redistribution organisation agrees to take all necessary measures to ensure the safe and hygienic storage, handling and transport of this surplus food, including visual inspections for quality, damage and packaging integrity, before redistributing this food to other organisations or end recipients.

Signed..... **Date** ...../...../.....

On behalf of redistribution organisation receiving food .....

10 A 'copy-and-paste' version of the template is available here.



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