



Don't keep it under wraps

How much packaging is there on everyday groceries and how easy is it to recycle?

Many Which? members are worried by the amount of packaging on food and find some of it hard to recycle.

In our latest research, 94% of members said there was too much food packaging and nearly all felt manufacturers and supermarkets should do more to reduce it. In fact, nearly one in three have even refused to buy an item simply because of the amount of packaging on it.

Plastic packaging

It isn't just the amount of packaging that is the issue. It's also a question of whether it contains recycled content and whether you can actually recycle it in practice.

Our survey shows that most of you find it easy to recycle paper, cans, glass and plastic bottles.

However, other types of plastic packaging remain a challenge. In our survey, half of you told us that you find it difficult or impossible to recycle it.

To get a snapshot of how much plastic packaging is commonly recyclable and how

much supermarkets are using, we bought the same basket of 27 everyday items that commonly come in plastic, including pasta, milk and bread, from six supermarkets.

Can you easily recycle plastic?

It isn't surprising that so many of you find it difficult to recycle plastic packaging. Out of our shopping basket, only the plastic bottles could be widely recycled in kerbside collections – about 40% of the 27 items. Some councils do collect other plastic types – about 7% collect plastic tubs and trays from homes, according to a report published in 2008. But that still leaves a lot of packaging.

However, North Kesteven Council in Lincolnshire (one of the best councils in the country for recycling) said that the vast majority of our shopping basket could potentially be recycled from its kerbside collections. Marks and Spencer

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said 88% of the basket we bought from it could potentially be recycled.

We asked Paul Bettison, chairman of the environmental board at the Local Government Association to explain why there were differences between what different councils collect to be recycled.

He said it's not practical to recycle everything in all areas.

He added: 'Recycling facilities vary in different areas and councils have to work out if it's economical or environmentally friendly to transport waste halfway across the country.'

Supermarket packaging

As well as looking at how plastic could be recycled, we also compared how much plastic the six supermarkets were



PACKAGING WEIGH-IN

We've picked six packets from our shopping baskets to show how widely the lightest and the heaviest can differ in weight. Weights include paper label where there is one on the pack

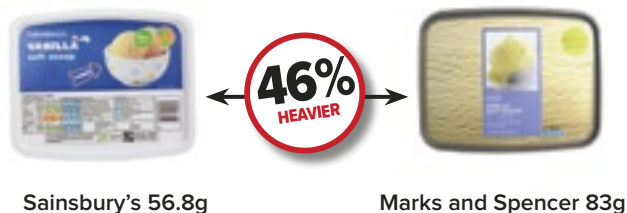
Unsmoked bacon



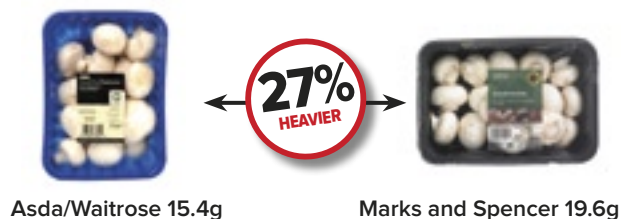
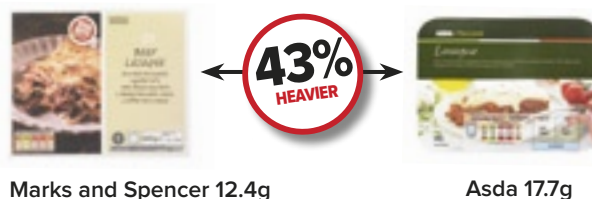
Cola



Vanilla ice-cream



Mushrooms

Cheddar slices^aLasagne (plastic tray)^b

^a Cheddar slices: Tesco=250g, Morrisons 200g ^b Figures shown are for plastic tray. The cardboard sleeve weights were Asda 9.3g, Marks and Spencer 13g

using in the shopping baskets that we bought. We found:

■ The 27 items were packaged in an average of 636g of plastic or carton. That may not sound much, but it builds up. The average bacon packet was nearly 15g and we eat about 50m packets of bacon a year. That's 7,500 tonnes of packets, the equivalent of 50 blue whales.

■ There were some big differences between the amount of plastic or carton packaging used by different supermarkets for the same item. With the cherry tomato packaging, Waitrose was 432% heavier than Sainsbury's. For strawberry punnets, Waitrose was 67% heavier than Marks and Spencer.

■ 14 of the 27 items had the same weight or volume of product. Their packaging averaged 392g of plastic and carton.

■ Sainsbury's and Tesco had the least plastic and carton, 369g/370g. Marks and Spencer the most – 415g (part of the reason was its weighty ice cream tub).

What supermarkets are doing

We asked the supermarkets what they're doing to improve the situation.

ASDA: 'We've removed more than 40,000 tonnes of packaging from our range. Our new cola bottle weighs 41g. We're working on a reduced neck bottle, which will take the weight down to 39g.

'Our new Fresh Tastes ready meal range has 65% less packaging than conventional ready meals.'

MARKS AND SPENCER: 'The weight of the 14 items doesn't indicate

'We found that only the plastic bottles could be widely recycled in kerbside collections'

recyclability or recycled content. We use as much recycled content as possible – which can make our plastic packaging weigh more but means it's more environmentally sustainable.

'80% of our clear plastic has recycled content. The ice cream tub weighs more because we have tamper evidence to ensure food quality and safety. It's also made from polypropylene, a heavier material than the polystyrene used for the other retailers' containers, but has greater potential to be easily recyclable. For bacon and mushrooms, we're working on introducing recycled plastics to the packets.'

Marks and Spencer said that the difference in the weight of the bacon packets we looked at was within expected variations in the manufacturing process. ►►

MORRISONS: 'Avoidable food waste creates a carbon footprint three times that of packaging. Good packaging reduces waste. We've saved 103 tonnes of packaging on blocked cheese and will look at sliced and grated cheese soon.'

SAINSBURY'S: 'Most of our packaging is now recyclable, and we're continuously looking at ways to reduce it. Since the test was carried out, we've reduced packaging on our British strawberries even further by removing the lid and replacing it with heat-sealed film. The tray is made from 50% recycled plastic.'

TESCO: 'Tesco has more than 3,500 individual projects looking at how we can reduce packaging in all areas.'

WAITROSE: 'Packaging of some products is being phased out for lighter packaging. For example, strawberry punnets will be reduced to 24.8g [from 40g] and will include 80% recycled materials. We've reduced packaging weight by a third since 2001.'

Which? says

We found big differences in plastic packaging weight for the items we bought and our members' opinion is that there is too much food packaging.

Supermarkets say they're reducing unnecessary packaging but they and manufacturers can do more. They should also continue to increase the recycled content. Cutting out excess packaging will cut costs for them and for councils, savings they could pass on to customers, while helping the environment.



KEEN TO RECYCLE

Richard Braithwaite, Wiltshire, sales director, 36

Richard, a keen recycler, lives in an area where the council collects paper, glass, metal cans and clothes from the doorstep to be recycled, but not cardboard or plastic.

We asked him to keep everything that he couldn't recycle from home, for a week, to see how much there was.

In total, he collected 30 items, which were mainly plastic bottles, food containers

and cardboard packaging.

Richard says it was disturbing how much he collected and that there weren't alternatives.

'For instance, when you have to buy vegetables with plastic round them I'm sure they could use something friendlier than plastic.'

He normally drives into Marlborough to recycle plastic, but can do this only for type

one plastic (PET), such as coke bottles: 'Manufacturers and supermarkets could label plastic better.'

'Sometimes it's hard to work out what category of plastic something is.'

Richard says that facilities in Marlborough are OK, compared with where he used to live, but it would be better if plastic and cardboard were added to doorstep collections.

How to reduce packaging

Tips on shopping without picking up excess packaging

■ CHOOSE CONCENTRATE

Fabric conditioner and soup, for instance, can be bought as concentrate, which will come in smaller packaging.

■ **BUY REFILLS** Items such as hand wash, detergent and herbs can be bought as refills.

■ SELECT LOOSE GOODS

Sometimes supermarkets sell

the same fruit and vegetables both loose and in plastic wrapping.

■ BUY WHAT YOU NEED

Wrap (Waste and Resources Action Programme) estimates that nearly a million tonnes of food is thrown away whole or in unopened packaging.

■ **COMPLAIN** If you think packaging is excessive,



complain to the retailer or manufacturer, or contact your local trading standards.

OUR RESEARCH

In April, we bought 27 own-brand items from Asda, Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose. 14 had the same product volume or weight. These were bacon, bathroom cleaner, cola, bread, ice cream, milk, minced meat, mushrooms, orange juice, pasta, ready meal lasagne, strawberries, sunflower/olive spread and washing up liquid. We weighed the packaging to get individual and total weights. We asked 2,214 Which? online panel members their views on packaging and recycling.