



# Food Waste Attitudes and Behaviours in Ireland

Consumer Insights for Grocery Retailers

EPA Circular Economy Programme and Ipsos B&A

**CIRCULAR ECONOMY PROGRAMME**

*The Driving Force for Ireland's Move to a Circular Economy*



## Research Background

This report synthesizes four major research studies related to household food waste, translating national data into actionable insights related to consumer behaviour among Irish adults.

### **Food Waste National Survey 2024**

This quantitative study was conducted to understand Irish citizens' attitudes, awareness, and behaviours regarding food waste.

### **Food Waste Ethnographic Study 2023**

This qualitative study used an innovative digital diary ethnographic approach to get a "fly on the wall" perspective on household food waste.

### **Food Waste B2B Research 2024**

This was a qualitative business-to-business (B2B) research project designed to understand food waste practices within the food manufacturing industry.

### **Single Use Plastic Packaging for Fruit and Vegetables National Survey 2024**

This quantitative study, focused on consumer usage and attitudes towards single-use packaging for fruit and vegetables.



**CIRCULAR ECONOMY PROGRAMME**

*The Driving Force for Ireland's Move to a Circular Economy*



## Executive Summary

### The Customer Mindset:

**High Concern:** While the price of food remains the biggest 'food issue' for people (77%), Food waste is a the second most significant issue, with **53% citing it as a key concern**.

**Environmental Awareness:** A strong majority (**81%**) see a clear link between 'throwing away food that could have been eaten' and climate change, indicating a receptive audience for sustainability initiatives.

### Key Quantitative findings:

**Key Drivers of Waste:** Household food waste is consistently driven by a mix of poor planning, confusion over date labels, a gap in food management skills, and ingrained purchasing habits that often start in-store.

### Motivators and Barriers:

**Primary Motivator for Change:** The most powerful incentive for consumers is financial, with **the potential to save around €700 a year**.

**Primary Barrier to Change:** A significant "competency gap" exists, where customers lack the practical skills to effectively plan, store, and use the food they buy.



**CIRCULAR ECONOMY PROGRAMME**

*The Driving Force for Ireland's Move to a Circular Economy*

## Report Structure

**Section 1:** Understanding Household Food Waste in Ireland

**Section 2:** Public Attitudes, Behaviours, and Competencies

**Section 3:** The Competency Gap and Willingness to Improve

**Section 4:** Key Insights



**CIRCULAR ECONOMY PROGRAMME**

*The Driving Force for Ireland's Move to a Circular Economy*



## Section 1: Understanding Household Food Waste in Ireland

To effectively address food waste, it is crucial to understand the research findings on the behaviours and attitudes towards the topic.



## Public Understanding of the Term 'Food Waste'

---

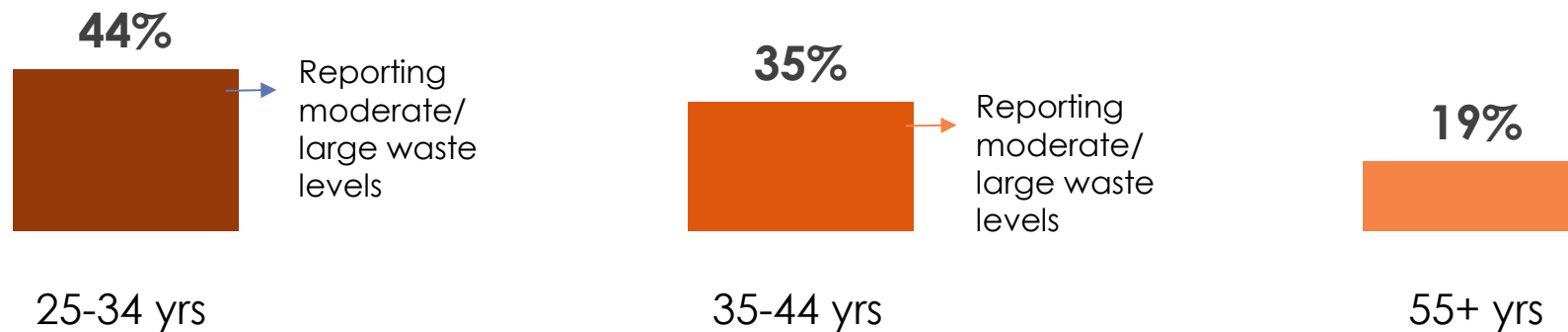
- ▶ There is no single, clear public consensus on what "food waste" means.
- ▶ While **64%** of people correctly identify food placed in a brown bin as waste, there is a need for public education to clarify that food waste is **'any food that could have been eaten that is thrown away.'**
- ▶ The ethnographic research confirms that some consumers mentally exclude composted food from their definition, thereby minimising their perceived impact

***"It goes in the compost bin. To be completely honest with you, I wouldn't consider that food waste. It's getting composted."***



## Self-Reported Food Waste Levels & Key Demographics

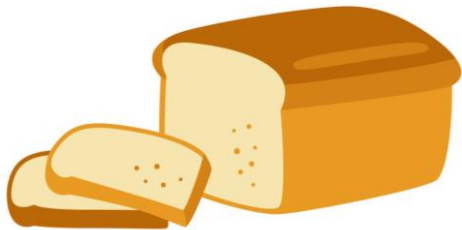
- ▶ In 2024, 29% of the population reported wasting a 'moderate' or 'large' amount of food
- ▶ However, this figure masks a significant demographic trend. Younger consumers say they are wasting more while those over 55 say they waste less.



- ▶ This identifies a prime audience for support: **Younger shoppers**, who are often time-poor and may have less experience in food management, are the group most in need of guidance, tools, and offerings that help them reduce waste.

## What is Being Wasted and Why?

The types of food being wasted are remarkably consistent across the iterations of this research over the years. The most frequently discarded food categories are:



Bread  
(48%\*)



Fruit  
(42%\*)



Vegetables  
(41%\*)



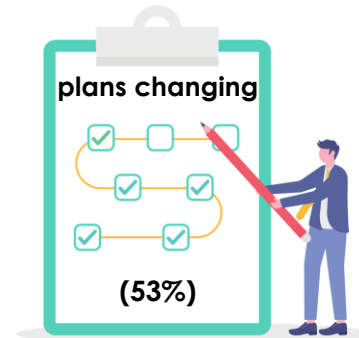
Salad  
(33%\*)

\* % of people who report often wasting this type of food



## What is Being Wasted and Why?

- ▶ The primary reasons consumers give for wasting food are that food has passed its **'Use-By' date (67%)**, **plans changing (53%)** and **leftovers not being used in time (51%)**



- ▶ In our ethnographic research, some other reasons why frequent food waste items are disposed of include:
  - ▶ Appearance and 'feel' triggers disposal (e.g., bananas turning brown or going soft).
  - ▶ Duration of time in fridge felt to be too long
  - ▶ Visual inspection – e.g. mould, etc.
- ▶ This highlights two areas where consumers need particular support: by having clearer date labels and by having solutions that offer greater time flexibility and are not as impacted by changing plans.

## Section 2: Public Attitudes, Behaviours, and Competencies



**CIRCULAR ECONOMY PROGRAMME**

*The Driving Force for Ireland's Move to a Circular Economy*

## Public Attitudes to Food Waste

---

- ▶ In 2024, public attitudes towards reducing food waste are overwhelmingly positive.
- ▶ A high sense of personal responsibility persists.
- ▶ Consumers are concerned about food waste and open to reducing their food waste but need further direction on how to do this.

**84%** of people agree that  
"everyone... has a responsibility to  
minimise the food they throw away"



## The Competency Gap and Willingness to Improve

- ▶ While attitudes are positive, there is a clear gap between **intention** and **ability**.
- ▶ Only 37% of people rate their overall food management competency as 'good' or 'very good'.
- ▶ However, the public shows a very strong willingness to adopt new, simple behaviours to bridge this gap.

**84% are willing to do a 'quick check' of their fridge and cupboards before shopping**



**80% are willing to use a shopping list.**

- ▶ **This signals that consumers are not resistant to change but are actively looking for straightforward ways to become better food managers, save money, and reduce their waste.**

### Section 3: The Competency Gap and Willingness to Improve

This section explores one of the central paradoxes in the research: the gap between the public's current skills and their future intentions. It first outlines the challenge of the "competency gap" before highlighting the significant opportunity presented by the public's strong willingness to adopt new, positive behaviours.



## The Competency Gap

While attitudes towards reducing food waste are positive, there is a clear gap between intention and ability.

- ▶ The research reveals a significant 'competency gap' in the public's food management skills. **37% of people rate their overall competency as 'good' or 'very good'.**

Meal planning for  
the week

24%



Very  
good

Measuring ingredients for  
each person when  
preparing meals

13%



Very  
good

Keeping a list of  
food in the freezer

10%



Very  
good

- ▶ This skills gap helps explain why, despite good intentions, food is often over-purchased and under-used at home.

## Future Intentions

Despite this skills gap, the research on future intentions provides positive news:

The public shows a very strong and active willingness to adopt new, simple behaviours to improve their food management.

Key future intentions include:

**Willing to do a  
'quick check' of  
their fridge and  
cupboards before  
shopping**

**84%**



**Willing to use a  
shopping list to  
help them only  
buy the food  
they need**

**80%**



**Willing to make small  
changes to how they  
manage the foods  
they waste the most  
(e.g., freezing bread).**

**81%**



**Willing to buy  
versatile foods they  
can plan several  
meals from**

**77%**



**Willing to use  
measuring devices  
so they cook the  
right amount of  
food**

**62%**



## Shopping Behaviours that Contribute to Waste

The research identifies specific in-store behaviours that directly lead to food waste at home. Two key habits stand out:

**Buying bigger packs than needed (59%):** Often because a smaller option isn't available.



**Buying the same items every week out of habit (41%):** Without checking if they are actually needed.

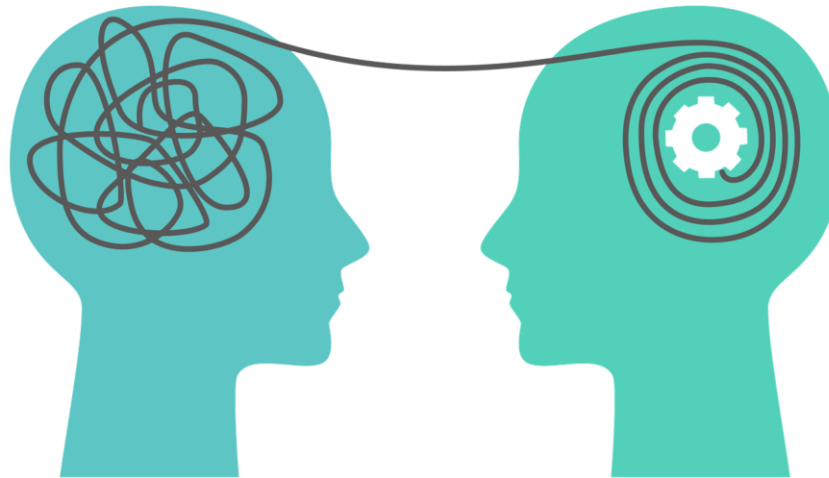
- ▶ These findings underscore the retail environment's critical role as the starting point for much of the food that is ultimately wasted.



## The Public's Receptiveness to Small, Easy Changes

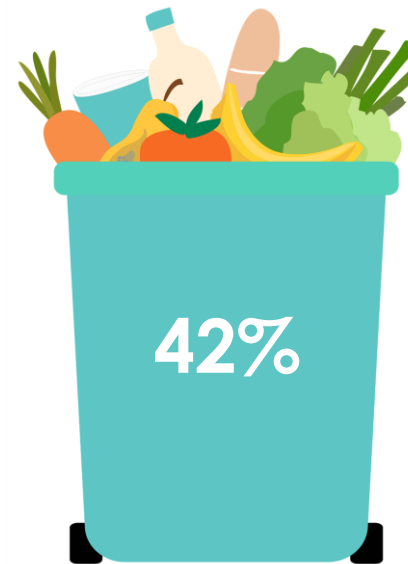
---

- ▶ A recurring theme throughout the research is that consumers are primed to adopt **small, practical adjustments** to their routines.
- ▶ They are not looking for a complete lifestyle overhaul.
- ▶ The high willingness to adopt simple planning behaviours indicates that the most effective interventions will be those that **are low-effort** and **easy to integrate** into a busy life.



## The Link to Packaging

- ▶ Packaging formats have a direct relationship with food waste outcomes.
- ▶ The research shows that consumers who waste a large or moderate amount of fruit and vegetables are more likely to buy pre-packaged (60%)
- ▶ Conversely, buying loose produce is perceived as a key strategy to avoid food waste **(cited by 42% of those who do it).**



**'Packaging helps me avoid food waste/ throwing away uneaten food'**

- ▶ **This desire for control and waste avoidance is a clear consumer preference.**

## Section 4: Key Insights

This concluding section synthesises all findings into a pragmatic situational analysis and a series of key actionable insights.



## Situational Analysis: The Core Barriers to Reducing Food Waste

---

### **Consumers face three core challenges in their efforts to reduce food waste:**

1. **The Skills and Knowledge Gap:** Consumers lack key skills in meal planning, portioning, and freezer management. Crucially, they are often confused by date labels, leading them to discard perfectly good food.
2. **The Environmental and Retail Hurdles:** The retail environment can hinder efforts through oversized packs and a lack of loose options. At home, disorganized fridges and freezers mean food is easily forgotten.
3. **The Challenge of Habit and Overconfidence:** Conscious motivation to save money is often overridden by ingrained shopping habits. Furthermore, a tendency for people to underestimate their own waste dampens their urgency to change.



## Core Insights: Irish Consumers & Food Waste

---

**The following five core insights highlight where consumer behaviour, market trends and commercial interests intersect:**

- ▶ Insight 1: The "Say-Do" Gap is Real, and Overconfidence is a Barrier.
- ▶ Insight 2: Financial Messaging is the Strongest Lever.
- ▶ Insight 3: There is a Major Food Management Skills Gap.
- ▶ Insight 4: The Public is Primed for Small, Easy Changes.
- ▶ Insight 5: Packaging Choices Directly Influence Food Waste.



## Insight 1: The "Say-Do" Gap is Real, and Overconfidence is a Barrier

---

- ▶ People consistently underestimate their own food waste.
- ▶ While the quantitative survey shows 71% of people believe they waste only a 'small' amount or no food, the ethnographic research reveals a different reality.
- ▶ When participants were asked to track their waste, they were consistently surprised by the actual amount they discarded.
- ▶ This "overconfidence bias" is a significant barrier.



## Insight 2: Financial Messaging is the Strongest Lever

---

- ▶ The message that an average household wastes €700 worth of food per year makes a bigger impression on the public than the fact that food waste contributes up to 10% of global greenhouse gases. While people care deeply about environmental concerns, pragmatic sentiments are highly effective accompaniments.
- ▶ This is directly mirrored in the B2B sector, where cost reduction is the primary driver for waste minimisation.
- ▶ Public and B2B communications will benefit by leading with the financial benefit of reducing food waste.



## Insight 3: There is a Major Food Management Skills Gap

---

- ▶ While people are willing to act, many lack the foundational skills.
- ▶ Only 37% of the population have an average competency rating of 'good' or 'very good' across all food management skills.
- ▶ Key weaknesses are measuring portions, planning meals for the week, and keeping track of freezer contents.
- ▶ There is a clear need for initiatives focused on building practical, step-by-step skills for planning, shopping, storing, and using food.





## Insight 4: The Public is Primed for Small, Easy Changes.

---

- ▶ There is overwhelming public willingness to adopt simple, low-effort behaviours.
- ▶ 84% are willing to do a 'quick check' of their fridge and cupboards before shopping, and 80% are willing to use a shopping list.
- ▶ These behaviours are accessible entry points that can build a household's confidence and create momentum for adopting more complex changes over time.



## Insight 5: Packaging Choices Directly Influence Food Waste

---

- ▶ Consumers who report wasting a large or moderate amount of fruit and vegetables are more likely to buy pre-packaged (60%) and prefer pre-packaged options.
- ▶ Conversely, buying loose produce is perceived as a way to avoid food waste (cited by 42% of those who do it).
- ▶ Initiatives that encourage the sale of loose produce can be framed as a powerful tool for both packaging reduction and food waste prevention, creating a dual benefit.



## Case Study: The Business and Supply Chain Perspective

---

**To provide further context, here is a perspective from food manufacturing businesses, illustrating the importance of the wider ecosystem:**

- ▶ An opportunity exists for the entire food industry to reduce waste by strengthening collaboration across the supply chain. It suggests that by moving beyond a "siloe approach," all partners can unlock shared efficiencies and create mutual value.
- ▶ Closer collaboration between manufacturers and retailers can turn the challenge of aligning production with demand into an opportunity. For example, some partners already work together to turn unsold products into new resources, creating a win-win for both.
- ▶ Ultimately, there is a strong, industry-wide appetite for greater partnership. There is a clear desire for collaborative forums and knowledge-sharing platforms to jointly develop solutions, turning the shared challenge of food waste into a collective success story and a more resilient, efficient supply chain for everyone.





## TO FIND OUT MORE:

Read more about food waste attitudes and behaviours in Ireland [here](#).

Email us: [cep@epa.ie](mailto:cep@epa.ie)

Check our website: [www.epacirculareconomy.ie](http://www.epacirculareconomy.ie)

Follow us on X and Instagram: @EPAIreland

Connect on LinkedIn

## CIRCULAR ECONOMY PROGRAMME

*The Driving Force for Ireland's Move to a Circular Economy*