



“Expert panel discussion on reducing the impact of food waste” - Post Event Report

This summary report details the main outcomes from a live panel discussion held at Loughborough University on 12th October 2018. The panel members were: Rt Hon Nicky Morgan, MP for Loughborough, Caroline Drummond MBE, LEAF Chief Executive, Trewin Restorick, CEO of Hubbub, Ady Bryan, Services and Community Manager Tesco Loughborough, and Aicha Jellil, Researcher from Loughborough University.

Scene setting: presentation by Trewin Restorick, Hubbub

Food waste is one of the most difficult challenges to tackle because it is something that everyone creates regularly, yet in typically small volumes, making it difficult to take responsibility for. In addition, there are a number of factors which compound food waste, including a growing population, austerity, confusion surrounding best before labels and a lack of cooking skills, particularly in younger generations. Technology has a role to play and the trial application of “smart” bins in UK homes was described which scanned food waste and recorded the cost of items. Other solutions are simpler and may include greater use of household freezers and better mealtime planning to reduce waste. It was recognised that although consumer food waste appears to represent the largest proportion of waste in the UK, this waste is in fact a symptom of a much greater problem: one of a food provision system that too easily leads to food waste. In this respect consumers alone would likely be unwilling and unable to address this waste stream and therefore cross-stakeholder action is required.

A summary of the discussion from the panel debate

What are the main challenges of food waste at manufacturing and farming level?

Farming comes with challenges such as disease and storage and so levels of waste can fluctuate. Furthermore, the way in which farmers interact with retailers and consumer demand is significant. For example, quick retailer orders are causing large issues because, whilst previously, supermarket orders were known a month before, now a supermarket could change an order in the middle of farmer processing it. Furthermore, consumer preferences, such as the drive for “topped and tailed” beans can unnecessarily cause waste but this is beyond the farmers’ ability to deal with.

How do promotional prices and events (e.g. BOGOF) influence consumer food waste and what has been done to address this?

It was discussed that BOGOF could potentially lead to food waste and that because of this many retailers had largely ceased offering these sorts of offers, although multi-save/link-save offers still might encourage over purchasing. It was further discussed how selling food in unit sized items (to provide flexible portion sizes) was being instigated in some stores (e.g. the CO-OP sell one egg), but there are concerns that this may require additional packaging.

Could we track what consumers are buying to influence change?

Retailers can often see what consumers buy online and in-store, and whether this is a small or large shop. A membership card (e.g. Tesco Clubcard) helps understand consumers at an individual level. There is therefore the potential to use data and subtle influences to encourage changes in behaviour.

As food is cheap, will it be always seen as a disposable commodity?

We seem to have lost the value of food - i.e. knowing what is involved in food production - so we need to gain this value back, like previous generations had. It was highlighted that schemes were in place in which different generations of a community gather in communal kitchens to share cooking techniques and recipes. This method has thus far been implemented in communal kitchens provided by Neff and B&Q in Buckinghamshire and Suffolk with support from professional chefs.

Do we think that eliminating single use packaging leads to increased food waste?

On the subject of packaging, movements towards reducing/eliminating plastic packaging (as well as other materials) were discussed, but it was stressed that this needs to be done in a way that recognises that packaging often plays a vital role in preserving food: it is not always bad. The rise in reusable packaging was recognised as an interesting option, but some concerns over quality control and hygiene will need to be addressed. Tesco (as well as other retailers) have begun removing best before dates from fresh produce as these were seen to cause premature disposal of food. However, use by dates remain important in maintaining food safety. The reinstatement of common sense in determining when food is good/not good to eat should be encouraged.

How is Brexit going to affect local and national food waste?

The effect of Brexit on food waste was briefly discussed, but it would seem may depend on how much of EU legislation we will want to implement post-Brexit and our relationship with the EU, neither which are yet defined.

Are there any real examples of schools implementing food waste approaches?

LEAF Farming work with teenagers to engage them with farming and Sainsbury's have also worked with schools to reduce food waste.

Similar to Tesco's Wonky-veg, 'imperfect' produce has been introduced by many retailers: Does this make a real difference to food waste?

It was unclear whether the introduction of 'wonky veg' actually had a benefit in reducing food waste, since this produce used to be disposed of but is now eaten and it is not envisaged that people are buying more. Therefore what happens to the 'perfect' fresh produce that it is displacing? It was warned that farmers operate on about a 1% profit margin and therefore any repercussions of changing the way we buy fresh produce needs to be carefully considered. When it comes to consumers, they are often inclined to buy food with the longest life (fresh produce, fresh meat, dairy). But perhaps there should be a way to encourage people to buy food with a life that corresponds to when they want to eat it. This was seen as a very difficult challenge to overcome.

If we need to help consumers better manage their food to avoid waste, then what tools could we practically provide them with?

Smart fridges which can provide recipes depending on the contents of your fridge are being developed as are phone apps that remind you to pick up a product you may require when you're near a supermarket. There are however many challenges involved in developing such tools. One issue is that you have different consumers - once a week or everyday visitors - and they will often go to buy specific items that they prefer to eat which removes some flexibility. Online customers may also have busy lives and prefer to have a longer shelf life for products. It needs to be remembered that not everyone has access to the same technology, so when developing policies and technologies to tackle food waste, we need consider the full market and not just a subset of consumers.

If we get consumers to waste less, they will surely buy less, therefore how can supermarkets (and the rest of the supply chain) continue to ensure profitability whilst reducing food waste?

It was proposed that reducing consumer food waste would reduce the costs of dealing with waste and ultimately, could lead to a more streamlined system, something that might actually benefit the retailer and supply chain. It was also highlighted that it is not just supply chain economic costs that need to be considered, instead, we should consider other costs, such as the impact of obesity. Rather than making small changes, we need to make large and brave changes to the full food supply system in order to reduce food waste and its associated impacts.