

# The Future of Food Labelling in the UK

**Food labelling plays a crucial role in shaping consumer choices and promoting public health in the UK. The effectiveness of food labelling has a profound impact on consumers' ability to make informed decisions about their diet and overall well-being. This whitepaper, based on NSF's commissioned comprehensive research of 2,000 UK adults delves into the importance, efficacy, challenges, and consumer expectations of food labelling in the UK.**

For food brands, complying with labelling regulations is of paramount importance, not only to meet legal requirements but also to build consumer trust and maintain transparency. However, this task is becoming increasingly complex in today's globalised food market. As dietary trends evolve, new ingredients emerge, and scientific understanding of nutrition advances, food companies must constantly update their labels to reflect these changes. Moreover, with the rise of international trade, brands must navigate a maze of different labelling standards across various countries, making compliance a challenging and resource-intensive process. This complexity underscores the need for robust systems and expertise within food companies to ensure accurate and up-to-date labelling that meets both regulatory requirements and consumer expectations.

## 1. The role of food labels in consumer decision-making

Food labelling has a profound impact on consumer purchasing behaviour in the UK. According to our recent research, three-quarters (76%) of UK adults report that they at least sometimes read food labelling before purchasing food items. This figure rises to 82% among those aged 18-34, highlighting the importance younger consumers place on food label information. Compared to five years ago, nearly half (45%) of UK adults also report paying more attention to food labelling, with this figure increasing slightly to 49% among 18-34 year olds.



The influence of food labels extends beyond the initial purchase decision, as they also shape dietary choices and enable consumers to compare products. Just under half (49%) of UK adults agree that current food labels provide them with enough information to make the right food choices. However, notably fewer (29%) agree that current labels adequately address sustainability concerns, indicating a gap between consumer expectations and the information provided on labels.

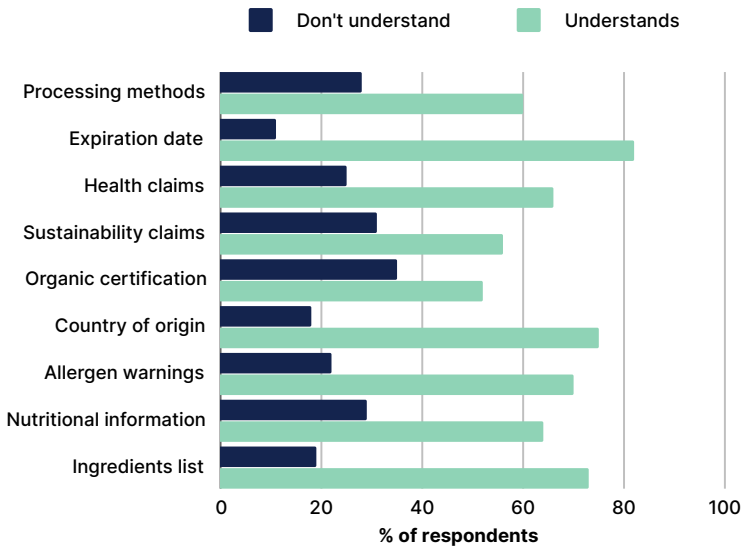
## Influence on purchasing behaviour

The most commonly read types of food labelling in the UK are expiration dates (59%), ingredients lists (46%), and nutritional information (42%). Older consumers aged over 55 are much more likely to look at expiration dates than those aged 18-34 (75% vs 44%), as well as ingredients lists (51% vs 38%) and country of origin (30% vs 20%). In contrast, younger adults aged 18-34 are more concerned with reading allergen warnings (24% vs 12%), organic certification (17% vs 8%), and processing methods (14% vs 8%).

These differences in labelling priorities across age groups highlight the need for food manufacturers and retailers to tailor their labelling strategies to meet the diverse needs of their target consumers. By providing clear, comprehensive, and relevant information on food labels, businesses can build trust and loyalty among their customer base.

### Comprehension of food labelling

Comprehension is generally high across food labelling.



### The impact on dietary choices

Food labels play a crucial role in helping consumers make informed dietary choices. When it comes to ultra-processed foods (UPFs), UK adults are more likely to report that it is easy to identify them through food labels (48%). However, three in ten (31%) still find it difficult, revealing room for improvement in labelling practises. Younger adults demonstrate a much higher comprehension of food labelling in this area, with 63% reporting that they find it easy to identify UPFs, compared to 39% of those over 55.

The trust consumers place in health claims on food packaging also varies significantly by age. UK adults are most likely to think that health claims are untrustworthy (44%), with this figure increasing to 57% among those over 55. In contrast, **younger people aged 18-34 are over twice as likely to say that they think health claims are trustworthy compared to those over 55 (60% vs 25%).**

These findings underscore the importance of clear, accurate, and age-appropriate food labelling in supporting healthy dietary choices across different consumer segments. By providing transparent information about the nutritional content and processing methods of food products, labels can empower consumers to make more informed decisions about their health and well-being.

### Useful additions and premium pricing

When asked about what information would be most useful as additions to food labelling, UK adults cite comprehensive detailed processing information (70%) and allergen information (65%) as the top priorities. This is followed by ethical sourcing information (62%), environmental impact scores (59%), and scannable QR codes offering extra information (50%).

Interestingly, willingness to pay more for products with comprehensive and transparent food labelling varies by age. While a third (32%) of UK adults would be willing to pay more, this figure drops to just 17% among those over 55. **On average, consumers would be willing to pay between 9% and 12% more for products with improved labelling.**

By providing detailed, relevant, and easily comparable information on food labels, manufacturers and retailers can differentiate their products, build consumer trust, and potentially command a premium price for their commitment to transparency. As consumer demands for comprehensive labelling continue to grow, businesses that invest in clear and informative food labels are likely to gain a competitive edge in the market.

## 2. Challenges in food label comprehension

Despite the general understanding of food labelling among UK consumers, there remain significant challenges in comprehending certain aspects of food labels. These challenges have an impact on consumers' ability to make informed decisions about their food choices and overall health.



### Complexity of nutritional information

One of the primary challenges consumers face is the complexity of nutritional information presented on food labels. While 64% of UK adults report understanding nutritional information, a significant portion still struggles to interpret and apply this data to their dietary needs. The use of technical terms, percentages, and serving sizes can be confusing for many consumers, particularly those with lower levels of nutrition literacy. This complexity can lead to misinterpretation or disregard for important nutritional facts, hindering the ability to make healthier food choices.

To address this challenge, there is a growing push for standardisation of front-of-pack nutritional labelling (FoPNL) across the EU. Currently, various government-endorsed FoPNLs are in use, such as the Nutri-Score, Keyhole, and Nutrinform battery. However, these voluntary schemes have been criticised for not being consumer-friendly or providing adequate information about the nutritional quality of food products. A standardised, mandatory FoPNL system could help simplify nutritional information and enable consumers to make more informed decisions at a glance.

### Understanding of sustainability claims

Another area of concern is the comprehension of sustainability claims on food labels. The research reveals that only 56% of UK adults understand sustainability claims, and even fewer (29%) believe that current food labels adequately address sustainability concerns. This lack of understanding can be attributed to the absence of standardised definitions and criteria for sustainability claims, as well as the proliferation of vague or misleading statements.

Consumers increasingly demand transparency regarding the environmental impact of their food choices, but the current labelling landscape falls short in providing clear, reliable

information. The development of standardised eco-labels and more stringent regulations around sustainability claims could help bridge this gap and empower consumers to make more environmentally conscious decisions.

### Interpretation of health benefits

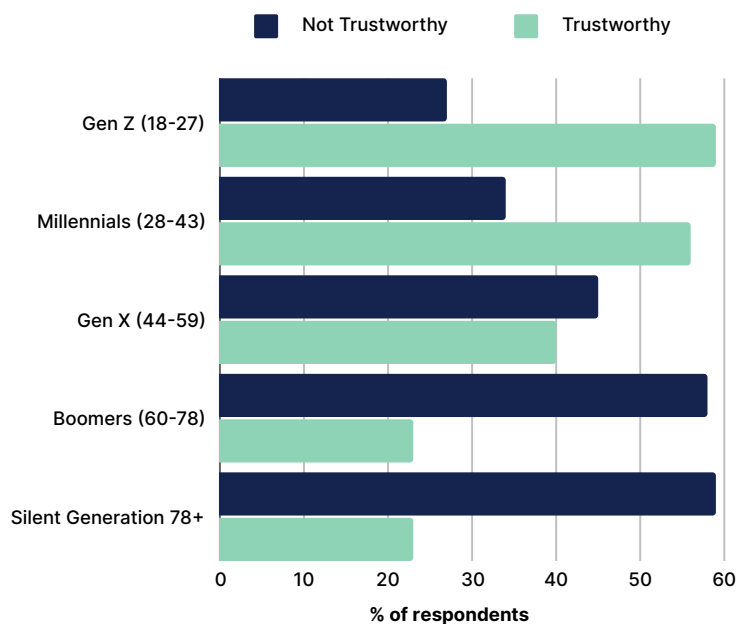
The interpretation of health claims on food labels also presents a challenge, particularly among older consumers. The research indicates that 57% of those over 55 find health claims untrustworthy, compared to just 27% of those aged 18-34. This discrepancy highlights the need for clearer, more substantiated health claims that can be easily understood by consumers across all age groups.

The "health halo" effect, where the presence of certain claims (e.g., organic, natural) leads consumers to perceive a product as healthier overall, can also contribute to misinterpretation. Stricter regulations around health claims, along with consumer education initiatives, could help mitigate this effect and ensure that health benefits are communicated accurately and transparently.

Addressing these challenges in food label comprehension requires a multi-faceted approach involving regulatory bodies, food manufacturers, and consumer advocacy groups. By prioritising clarity, standardisation, and transparency in food labelling, we can empower consumers to make more informed decisions about their food choices, ultimately contributing to better public health outcomes and a more sustainable food system.

### How trustworthy are health claims on food packaging?

Overall, younger people are much more trusting of health claims, as those aged 18-34 are over twice as likely to say that they think health claims are trustworthy compared to over 55s (60% vs 25%).



### 3. Consumer demands for label improvements

As consumers become increasingly health-conscious and environmentally aware, their expectations for food labelling have evolved significantly. The research reveals a growing demand for clearer, more comprehensive, and standardised labelling practises that address concerns about allergens, processing methods, and sustainability.

#### Desire for clearer allergen warnings

One of the most pressing consumer demands is for clearer and more prominent allergen warnings on food labels. With food allergies on the rise, particularly among younger generations, consumers are seeking easily identifiable and comprehensive allergen information to ensure their safety and well-being. The research indicates that 65% of UK adults consider comprehensive allergen information to be one of the most useful additions to food labelling. This sentiment is particularly strong among younger consumers, with 71% of those aged 18-34 prioritising allergen information on labels.

However, the proliferation of precautionary allergen labels and sustainability claims on food packaging may be overwhelming consumers, potentially obscuring critical allergen information and compromising food safety for allergic individuals. This highlights the need for a balanced approach to food labelling that prioritises essential safety information while still addressing consumer demands for transparency and sustainability.

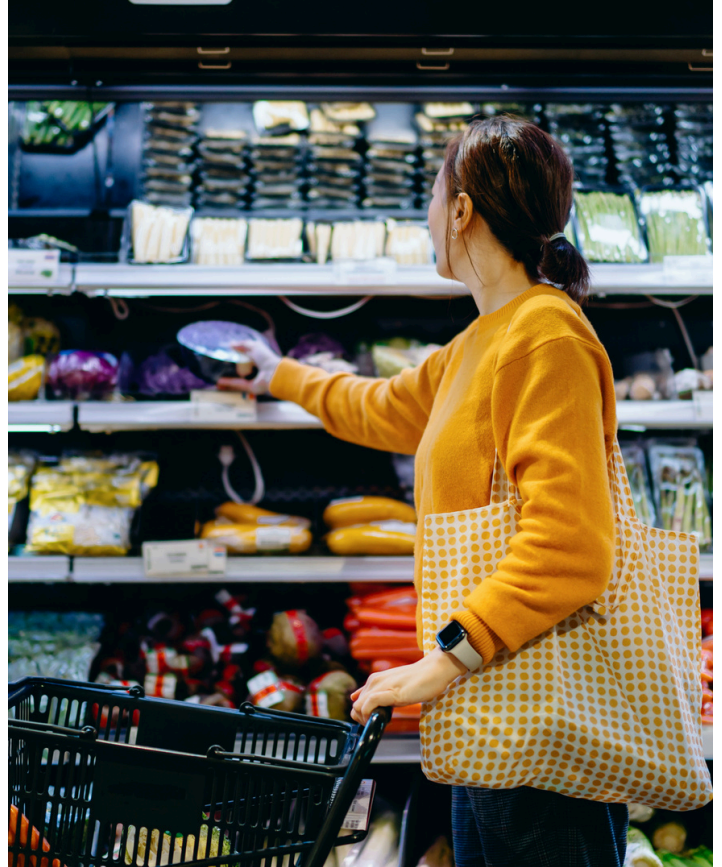
#### Call for more detailed processing information

Another key area of consumer interest is detailed processing information. The research reveals that 70% of UK adults consider comprehensive processing information to be one of the most useful additions to food labelling. This demand is particularly pronounced among younger consumers, with 77% of those aged 18-34 expressing a desire for detailed processing information on labels.

This growing interest in processing methods reflects a broader trend towards clean label foods and a heightened awareness of the potential health implications of ultra-processed foods. As consumers seek to make more informed choices about the foods they consume, there is a clear need for food manufacturers to provide transparent and easily understandable information about their processing methods.

#### Need for standardised sustainability metrics

Sustainability has become an increasingly important consideration for consumers when purchasing food products. However, the research indicates that only 29% of UK adults believe that current food labels adequately address sustainability concerns. This highlights a significant gap between consumer expectations and the information provided on labels.



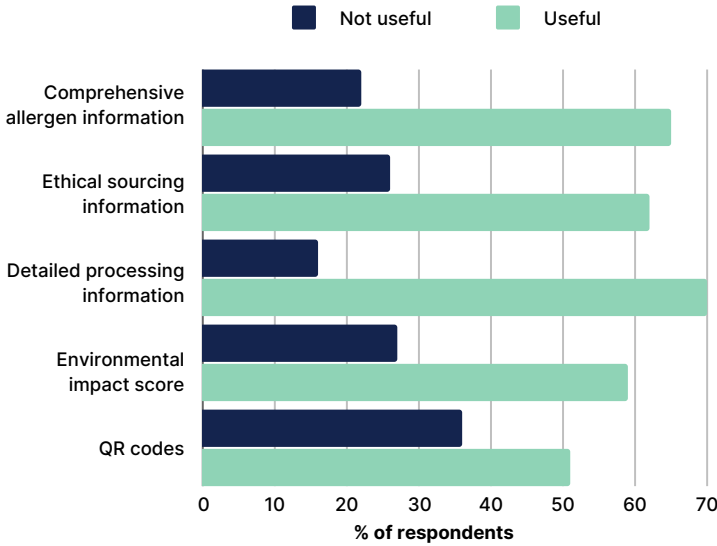
To bridge this gap, there is a growing demand for standardised sustainability metrics on food labels. The research reveals that 59% of UK adults consider an environmental impact score to be a useful addition to food labelling. This demand is particularly strong among younger consumers, with 73% of those aged 18-34 expressing an interest in seeing environmental impact scores on labels.

The development of standardised sustainability metrics would enable consumers to make more informed choices based on the environmental impact of their food purchases. However, implementing such a system presents significant challenges, as it would require a coordinated effort among food manufacturers, retailers, and regulatory bodies to ensure consistency and reliability.

As consumer demands for clearer allergen warnings, detailed processing information, and standardised sustainability metrics continue to grow, food manufacturers and regulatory bodies must work together to develop labelling practises that meet these evolving expectations. By prioritising transparency, safety, and sustainability, the food industry can foster greater trust among consumers and contribute to a healthier, more sustainable food system.

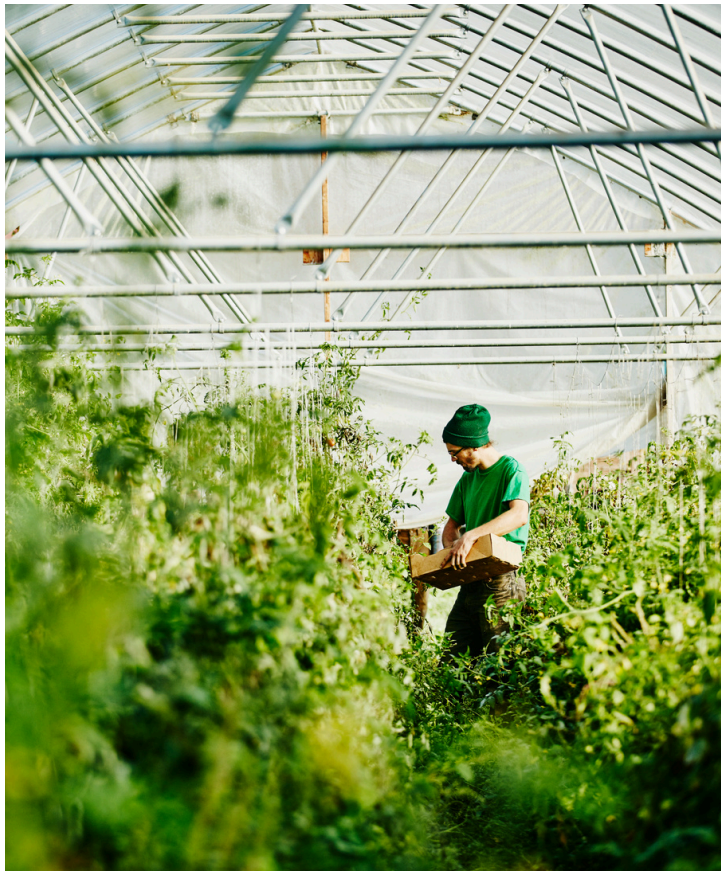
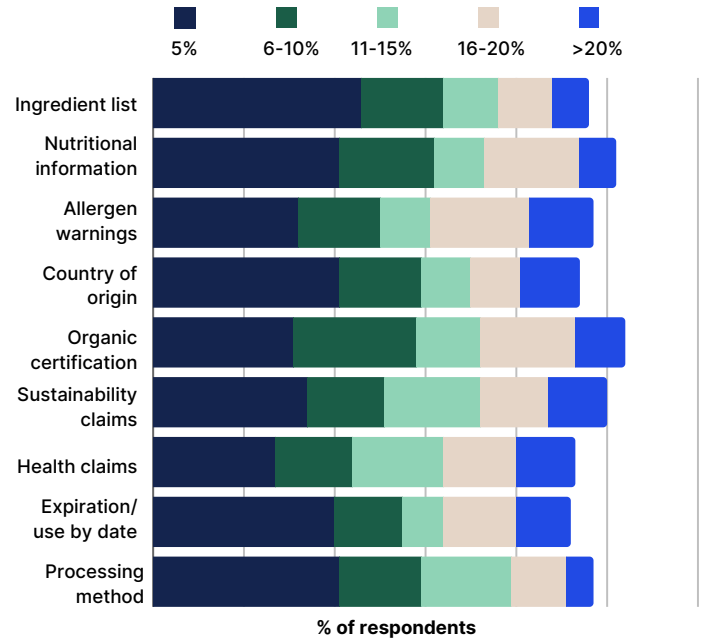
### The usefulness of labelling additions

Better allergen and food processing information are considered most useful additions to food labelling.



### Premium pricing for comprehensive labelling

Just under a third (32%) would be willing to pay more for food products which have more comprehensive and transparent food labelling. However, three fifths (60%) reject this idea, rising to 75% amongst those aged over 55. Of those who said they would be prepared to pay more, better nutritional information (36%), ingredients information (31%) and organic certification (26%) top the list. People were the least willing to pay more for allergen warnings (21%) and country of origin information (20%).



The exploration of consumer insights into food labelling in the UK reveals a complex landscape of expectations and challenges. Food labels have a significant influence on purchasing decisions, dietary choices, and product comparisons, with consumers increasingly seeking clear, comprehensive information about ingredients, nutritional content, and sustainability. However, challenges persist in comprehending complex nutritional data, interpreting sustainability claims, and understanding health benefits, particularly among older consumers.

To address these issues, there's a growing need for clearer allergen warnings, detailed processing information, and standardised sustainability metrics on food labels. As consumer demands evolve, the food industry must adapt to provide more transparent, accessible, and reliable labelling practises. For more information regarding food labelling requirements, you can visit [nsf.org](http://nsf.org). By prioritising clarity and consumer education, we can empower shoppers to make informed decisions, ultimately contributing to better public health outcomes and a more sustainable food system.

#### NSF

Hanborough Business Park,  
 Long Hanborough, Oxfordshire, OX29 8SK, UK  
[www.nsf.org](http://www.nsf.org)  
 E: [info@nsf.org](mailto:info@nsf.org)