businesscompanion
trading standards law explained

Language requirements for food labelling

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In this guide, the words 'must' or 'must not' are used where there is a legal requirement to do (or not do) something. The word 'should' is used where there is established legal guidance or best practice that is likely to help you avoid breaking the law.

Although the United Kingdom left the European Union (EU) in 2021, certain pieces of legislation (known as 'assimilated law') continue to apply until such time as they are replaced by new UK legislation, revoked or permitted to expire. This means that our guidance still contains references to legislation that originated from the EU.

This guidance is for Scotland

Assimilated Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 *on the provision of food information to consumers* states that, where mandatory labelling is required, it must be in English. It is an offence for retailers or wholesalers to supply food in the UK without English labelling.

The Regulation requires certain compulsory information, which must be in English and appear either on a label on (or attached to) the packaging, or on a label clearly readable through the packaging.

The EU version of the Regulation states that required labelling must be "in a language easily understood by the consumers of the Member States where a food is marketed", so if you are exporting food products to the European Union, labelling needs to be in the most appropriate language for the country you are exporting to.

Definition of food

'Food' is defined to include not only substances that we would normally associate with the term, but also:

- Drink
- Chewing gum and similar products
- Substances of no nutritional value, which are used for human consumption
- Articles and substances used as ingredients in the preparation of food

Retailers' responsibilities

They must make sure that all food and drink that they sell displays all mandatory information that the product requires. This must be in English; however, that does not preclude also having the labelling in additional languages when some of the customers are likely to be non-English speakers.

This information should appear on one of the following:

- A label on the packaging
- A label attached to the packaging
- A label clearly readable through the packaging

Wholesalers' responsibilities

Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 requires that if food is "intended for the final consumer but marketed at a stage prior to sale to the final consumer" it must comply with the Regulations.

Food is considered to be ready for delivery to the ultimate consumer if the packaging will not be changed prior to sale by the eventual retailer. The wholesaler must, therefore, ensure that the food complies with the Regulations unless the retailer will repackage it. For example, a wholesaler sells cans of soft drinks to retailers in trays. The cans themselves will not be altered before reaching the ultimate consumer. The soft drink is, therefore, ready for delivery to the ultimate consumer and must have the correct labelling in English.

The information on food sold by wholesalers must appear as described above for retailers. Alternatively, the mandatory information (please see 'Labelling of prepacked foods: general') can be supplied on documentation supplied previously or accompanying the food. However, if this method is used, the name of the food, durability indication, storage conditions and business details must appear on the external packaging.

The same rules apply to the packaging of food sold to mass caterers* if food is prepared in the course of a business and is intended to be supplied to the consumer in that packaging.

[*'Mass caterers' includes restaurants, canteens, pubs, clubs, schools or similar, and mobile caterers such as fast food vans.]

Where the food is not intended to be sold to consumers in the packaging (for example, where it is intended to be sold to a mass caterer), less mandatory information is required.

'Labelling of prepacked foods: general' provides information on the mandatory requirements for all prepacked foods. This applies to all food labelling in the UK, regardless of whether the food is produced here or not.
If you are considering importing food from outside the UK, you may also find it useful to look at the

information on imported food on the GOV.UK website. This site provides information about the legal requirements affecting different types of food that you may be considering importing (not only labelling).

Trading Standards

For more information on the work of Trading Standards Services and the possible consequences of not abiding by the law, please see 'Trading Standards: powers, enforcement and penalties'.

> In Scotland, food labelling laws are not generally enforced by Trading Standards Services, but rather by Environmental Health. However, we have included In-depth Guides on food for Scotland in order to provide more comprehensive guidance.

In this update

No major changes.

Last reviewed / updated: October 2026

Key legislation

- Food Safety Act 1990
- Assimilated Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 *on the provision of food information to consumers*
- Food Information (Scotland) Regulations 2014

Please note

This information is intended for guidance; only the courts can give an authoritative interpretation of the law.

The guide's 'Key legislation' links go to the legislation.gov.uk website. The site usually updates the legislation to include any amendments made to it. However, this is not always the case. Information on all changes made to legislation can be found by following the above links and clicking on the 'More Resources' tab.

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