



**citizens  
advice  
scotland**

# **Eat, Drink and be Wary**

*Scottish consumer advice  
about food and drink issues*

**December 2016**

## Introduction and Key Points



Scotland's food and drink industry is one of the best in the world but some consumers in Scotland are getting a raw deal and facing poor quality produce and service by some leading food retailers and manufacturers.

In Citizens Advice Scotland's first ever report on food and drink issues we summarise some of the most common issues brought to the service by consumers. Between August 2015 and December 2016 our consumer helpline assisted with over 800 enquiries regarding food and drink. Additionally there were over 200 enquires at local CAB regarding food and drink.

This report analyses the food and drink case notes from the national consumer helpline service. The main findings are:

- ▶ The most common complaint regarded the selling of out of date foodstuff by retailers
- ▶ A number of vulnerable consumers had reported being targeted by door to door high pressure sales of poor quality fish. Some of these clients had lost hundreds of pounds
- ▶ There was an alarming number of reports relating to potentially counterfeit alcohol passed off as popular brands of spirit and wine. However these reports were exclusive to the Greater Glasgow areas and mostly associated with convenience stores.
- ▶ Scotland's supermarkets were the most commonly reported retailer associated with calls relating to food and drink. Delivery issues and the finding of foreign bodies were the most common for cases relating to supermarkets.

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Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS), our 61 member Citizen Advice Bureaux (CAB), the Citizen Advice consumer helpline, and the Extra Help Unit, form Scotland's largest independent advice network. Advice provided by our service is free, independent, confidential, impartial and available to everyone. Our self-help website 'Advice in Scotland' provides information on rights and helps people solve their problems. In 2015/16 the Citizens Advice Service network helped over 310,000 clients in Scotland alone and dealt with over one million advice issues. With support from the network clients had financial gains of over £120 million and the Scottish self-help website received over 4 million unique page views.

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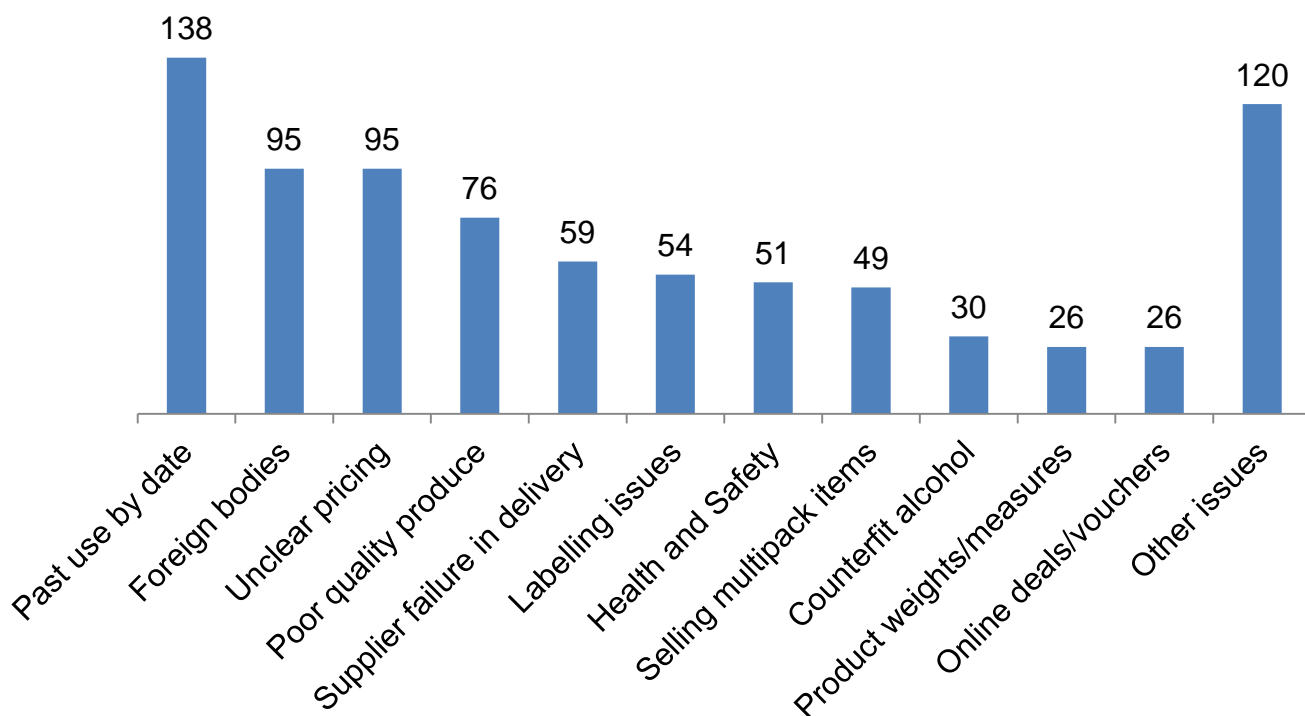
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## Types of issue with food and drink

CAS analysed 809 calls to our national consumer helpline by Scottish consumers between August 2015 and December 2016. This gave a detailed sample of the types of issues raised.

Figure 1 shows the proportion of the types of issue raised and below are some example cases that are typical of cases reported to the helpline.

**Figure 1: Type of issue**



### Sale past use by date

The most common complaint type regarded the sale of goods past the marked “use by” or “best before” dates. While some of these enquiries had merit regarding the sale of goods past “use by” or “sell by” dates there is widespread misunderstanding of “best before” dates and whether products can be sold after this date.



- ▶ A consumer from Glasgow reported buying cold meat from her local supermarket but on returning home noticed the “use by” date was five days ago. She said it was lucky she hadn’t eaten the meat before she noticed.
- ▶ A consumer from Inverclyde reported feeling ill after drinking from a can of beer which he noticed afterwards was out of date by a number of months. He had just bought it that day from a major supermarket.

## Foreign Bodies

Foreign bodies in food was the next most common complaint type. While most of these regarded processed foods such as ready meals, juices or frozen foods there were also a considerable number of fresh foods that contained foreign bodies or pests.



- ▶ A consumer from Dumfries and Galloway found a dead snail in a bag of frozen vegetables bought from his local supermarket .
- ▶ A consumer from Edinburgh when eating a ready meal from a supermarket cut her mouth when a grey sharp piece of plastic was found in her food.

## Unclear Pricing

Pricing issues were also commonly cited by those contacting us. Most commonly this related to offers not being honoured, the price displayed on the shelf or product not being accepted at the till or pricing not being displayed.



- ▶ A consumer from North Ayrshire tried to buy a chocolate multi-buy offer advertised on the shelf and in the window of her local convenience store. However the trader said the offer had expired and would not offer the price despite the signs remaining up for the rest of the week.

## Counterfeit Alcohol

There were 30 reports regarding the sale of counterfeit alcohol, with some consumers reporting ill health after consuming these drinks. These cases were mostly associated with small convenience stores and were mostly found in the Greater Glasgow area. Buckfast Tonic Wine and different Vodka brands were the most commonly cited products of counterfeiting.



- ▶ A consumer from Lanarkshire reported buying a bottle of Smirnoff vodka from a local convenience store. However she thought it didn't taste right and on closer inspection the label looks like cheap printing and the cap isn't the same as those with the proper Smirnoff branding.
- ▶ A consumer from Glasgow bought a bottle of Buckfast from a local off-licence. He thought it strange at the time as it was cheaper than he usually pays and when he asked the trader they said it was that price to compete with other businesses. The consumer reports it did not taste right and the label looked different/washed out.

## Allergy Information



A number of clients presented evidence of traders failing to provide the right information on allergy and dietary issues. These cases were exclusively in the takeaway and restaurant sectors.

- ▶ A consumer from Lothian reported falling ill and needing emergency medical treatment after visiting a café. The client is allergic to dairy products and asked for soy milk in their coffee but the trader failed to comply with the request and made it with cow's milk.

## Door to Door Scams

Door to door sales of fish by high pressure sales people were reported in 15 cases over the last year. Many of these reports came from concerned carers or family members of vulnerable consumers who had been sold a high volume of poor quality fish at values commonly exceeding £100.



- ▶ A consumer in Perth and Kinross reported being the victim of a scam door-to-door salesman. He was pressurised into buying a bulk sale of fish which the trader said was of very high quality. On cooking it the consumer found it was in fact very poor quality. He paid £90 for it and has no details of the trader.
- ▶ A CAB adviser reported a vulnerable client from Edinburgh who had been sold over £500 worth of poor quality fish. The trader had used high-pressure tactics, even attempting to take the clients to an ATM to withdraw cash, but the client convinced him to take a cheque instead.. Thankfully, the client's family managed to cancel the cheque before it was cashed. The client is now scared the trader will come back.

## Labelling Issues

A number of consumers reported problems with the labels on food and drink items. E.g. lack of an ingredients list, or poor information on allergies. There were also reports of misleading claims of provenance.



- ▶ A consumer from Edinburgh reported a popular maker of crisps over a newly-launched product which contained labelling that suggested it was suitable for vegans. However the ingredient list shows the product contains cows' milk and therefore not suitable for vegans.
- ▶ A consumer from East Ayrshire reported a butcher who prominently labelled and advertised his beef as Scottish, but in the small print admitted that it could be 'from Scotland or Ireland'.

## Frozen “fresh” food

A small but concerned number of consumers told us about instances where food was being sold as ‘fresh’, but had in fact been frozen prior to sale. This included bakery items, “fresh” meat and “fresh” vegetables. All of these complaints regarded practices by large well known supermarkets.

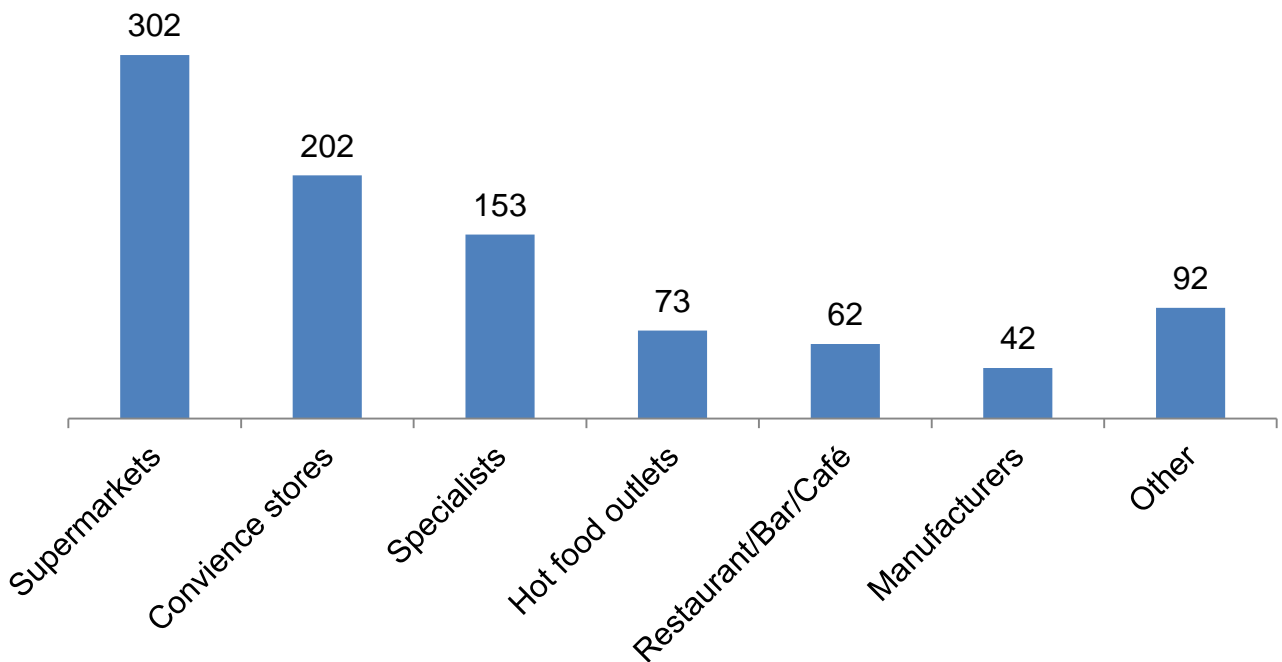


- ▶ A consumer from Glasgow reported being dissatisfied that his local supermarket is selling meat labelled as “fresh” but consistently finding it has actually been frozen prior to being put on display. The consumer thinks this is misleading as the packaging does not say it was previously frozen.
- ▶ A consumer from Dundee reported that his local supermarket is selling bakery goods advertised as “made fresh in store”. He has discovered however that many of these items have previously been frozen prior to display and feels this is misleading.

## Types of retailer

Supermarkets were the largest trader type among the cases reported to us in this research. Followed by convenience stores and specialists, such as fishmongers, butchers, vintners and confectioners. Figure 2 summarises the share of cases by trader type.

**Figure 2: Type of trader**







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