# Supermarkets fall short on supply chain emissions despite ambitious pledges



# Supermarkets Under Scrutiny: Failing on Environmental Commitments

The UK's largest supermarket chains are facing increasing criticism for not meeting their own ambitious environmental commitments. Research conducted by The Food Foundation and Feedback Global indicates that over the decade from 2014 to 2024, these retailers set approximately 600 sustainability pledges—roughly one every six days—yet have provided little evidence of meaningful progress. The analysis highlights significant gaps in transparency and accountability in crucial areas such as climate change, land use, and healthy diets.

One major concern identified in the report revolves around Scope 3 emissions—the greenhouse gases produced during the entire supply chain, which represent the majority of retailers' carbon footprints. While nearly 90% of the retailers assessed have established targets aimed at reducing supply chain emissions by 2030, only four—Aldi, Waitrose, Co-op, and Morrisons—are actively publishing updates specific to the UK. This lack of transparency raises questions about their commitment to sustainability and their ability to achieve set targets.

The disparity among the retailers shows a chaotic landscape of target-setting. Co-op, for instance, has established a noteworthy 104 targets, while its competitor Iceland has only set 15. This inconsistency extends to dietary initiatives, with Lidl being the only retailer that has committed to increasing sales of plant-based protein, despite the alarming fact that about half of supermarkets' emissions are connected to meat and dairy products.

The urgent need for enhanced accountability is further underscored by unsettling predictions from an anonymous group of corporate executives who suggest that the UK food sector may be heading towards an economic crisis more severe than that experienced during the pandemic. Their assessment warns that companies are inadequately prepared to tackle pressing challenges like soil degradation, extreme weather, and water scarcity.

Moreover, previous investigations have indicated a trend of diminishing sustainability efforts across the food industry, with many firms likely to fall short of crucial climate targets. The Food Foundation and Feedback Global suggest that the retail sector will need to enhance transparency and rigorous data disclosure concerning sustainability metrics to be held accountable for their commitments. Experts argue that it is time for robust regulations mandating large food businesses to disclose data about their environmental impacts, thereby setting measurable goals rather than vague pledges.

Jessica Sinclair Taylor, deputy director at Feedback Global, articulated the urgency of the situation, stating, “Supermarkets’ voluntary climate commitments clearly aren’t going to cut it when it comes to climate goals.” She highlighted the necessity for government intervention to ensure that all significant food businesses operate under legally enforceable standards in the near future.

The government's Climate Change Committee has also highlighted the vulnerability of the agricultural sector, signalling that well over half of England's farmland is now at serious risk from flooding due to climate change. As part of its recent Carbon Budget, the UK has set a definitive aim to decrease agricultural greenhouse gas emissions by 39% by 2040, necessitating a reduction of livestock numbers and meat consumption.

Despite the stark realities, it appears that while supermarkets have set Scope 1 and 2 emissions targets—concerning direct and indirect emissions from owned and controlled operations—progress on Scope 3 emissions remains a challenge. The call for mandatory reporting standards is gaining traction, as over half of the 49 commitments related to healthy and sustainable diets lack measurable targets, further emphasising the need for uniformity in how sustainability metrics are reported and assessed.

Rebecca Tobi, Senior Manager at The Food Foundation, reiterated the gravity of the situation, urging that “we are running out of time to avert the climate crisis.” The foundation stresses that businesses cannot manage this transition independently, highlighting the critical role of government in shaping a food strategy that ensures mandatory reporting and equitable regulations for the food industry.

While there are initiatives underway for collaboration between major retailers, such as efforts with the decarbonisation platform Manufacture 2030, to equip suppliers with resources and support for lowering emissions, these alone may not suffice. The demand for rigorous commitments and comprehensive accountability has never been clearer, and industry stakeholders must urgently reassess how they approach sustainability.

As the UK's leading supermarket chains stand at a crossroads, the time has come for them to step up, demonstrate real progress, and fulfil their pledges for a more sustainable future.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[2]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[4]](https://www.which.co.uk/reviews/shopping-sustainably/article/supermarkets-and-the-environment-ahzAC2s22tXv)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[5]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/sustainability-and-environment/supermarkets-sign-up-to-unprecedented-collaboration-on-climate-change/677688.article)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[2]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[6]](https://www.sustainability-beat.co.uk/2023/12/12/supermarket-supply-chain/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[7]](https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/news/ready-new-challenge-how-supermarkets-are-pledging-go-green)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[3]](https://www.edie.net/major-british-grocery-retailers-collaborate-to-accelerate-supply-chain-decarbonisation/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article), [[4]](https://www.which.co.uk/reviews/shopping-sustainably/article/supermarkets-and-the-environment-ahzAC2s22tXv)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/news/uks-top-supermarkets-failing-against-own-environmental-pledges/704201.article> - An article from The Grocer reports that the UK's largest supermarkets are not meeting their own environmental commitments. Research by The Food Foundation and Feedback Global analyzed 600 sustainability pledges made by the top 10 retailers between 2014 and 2024, finding insufficient progress and transparency. Key areas of concern include greenhouse gas emissions in supply chains (Scope 3 emissions), with only four retailers publishing UK-specific progress updates. The report calls for mandatory reporting on sustainability metrics to hold retailers accountable.
3. <https://www.edie.net/major-british-grocery-retailers-collaborate-to-accelerate-supply-chain-decarbonisation/> - An article from edie.net discusses how ten major UK grocery retailers, including Tesco, Asda, and Sainsbury’s, have partnered with decarbonisation platform Manufacture 2030 to reduce emissions across their supply chains. The collaboration aims to equip suppliers with tools and resources to decrease greenhouse gas emissions associated with sourcing, manufacturing, and transportation, enabling suppliers to achieve significant cost and time savings.
4. <https://www.which.co.uk/reviews/shopping-sustainably/article/supermarkets-and-the-environment-ahzAC2s22tXv> - An article from Which? reviews the environmental pledges of UK supermarkets, focusing on plastic packaging and food waste. It provides data on each supermarket's plastic packaging targets, reduction achievements, and food waste reduction goals. The article highlights the progress and challenges faced by retailers in meeting their sustainability targets, emphasizing the need for transparency and measurable outcomes.
5. <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/sustainability-and-environment/supermarkets-sign-up-to-unprecedented-collaboration-on-climate-change/677688.article> - An article from The Grocer reports that eight major UK supermarkets, including Aldi, Co-op, Lidl, M&S, Morrisons, Sainsbury’s, Tesco, and Waitrose, have agreed to a consistent set of measurement and reporting standards to cut emissions. This collaboration, initiated by climate change bodies Wrap and WWF, aims to establish common rules for measuring and reporting supply chain emissions, addressing the lack of consistent methodologies in the industry.
6. <https://www.sustainability-beat.co.uk/2023/12/12/supermarket-supply-chain/> - An article from Sustainability Beat details how ten major UK supermarkets, including Tesco, Asda, and Sainsbury’s, have partnered with decarbonisation platform Manufacture 2030 to reduce emissions throughout their supply chains. The collaboration aims to equip suppliers with resources to reduce emissions associated with sourcing, manufacturing, and transportation, enabling suppliers to achieve significant cost and time savings.
7. <https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/news/ready-new-challenge-how-supermarkets-are-pledging-go-green> - An article from Policy Connect discusses the recent environmental pledges made by major UK supermarket chains, focusing on Sainsbury’s commitment to invest £1 billion over the next 20 years to achieve net-zero emissions by 2040. The article outlines the specific areas of focus, including carbon emissions, water usage, plastic reduction, recycling, food waste, diet, and biodiversity, and highlights the practical changes being implemented to meet these targets.