

Kim Howells MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State
for Consumers and Corporate Affairs



**Department of
Trade and Industry**

Sir Teddy Taylor MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

14 October 1999

1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET
Direct line 0171 215 5518

Enquiries 0171 215 5000

Minicom 0171 215 6740

E-Mail
tlo.howells@tlo.dti.gov.uk

Dear Sir Teddy

Thank you for your letter of 13 September about units of measurement for selling loose goods.

When the present Government came into office we initiated a re-appraisal of national policy on the use of metric units, particularly for consumer goods sold by weight or measure. The results of the re-appraisal were published in July and I enclose two copies of the DTI's report.

The report confirms that, following an announcement to Parliament in 1965, all Governments have promoted the adoption of metric units as the primary system of measurement in the UK, in recognition of the global trend in adopting the metric system (including in other Commonwealth countries and in the United States of America). In pursuit of this policy, successive Governments agreed a series of EU directives - in 1973, 1976, 1980, 1985 and 1989 - which set deadlines for the harmonised use of metric units for economic, public health, public safety and administrative purposes.

As regards consumer goods, the report confirms that metric units are now used for labelling and pricing goods that are sold either in pre-packaged quantities or measured at the point of sale (eg petrol, fabrics, lengths of wood), the only exception being milk in returnable containers (mainly glass bottles) and draught beer. Under legislation made in 1994 goods sold loose by weight - mainly fresh foods - are due to be priced and weighed in grams and kilograms after 31 December 1999.

Goods sold loose by weight now account for about only 10 per cent of sales in the typical supermarket. Imperial weights have therefore become an anomaly in a mainly metric market, making it difficult to compare the price and weight of foods that are sold both loose and prepackaged (eg fruit, vegetables and meat). The Government reappraisal of metrication policy therefore concluded that there would be no benefit to either the consumer or the retailer in postponing the deadline - 31 December 1999 - set by the previous Administration for completing the change to metric units.

dti



I would like to stress that this change does not involve the immediate disappearance of the ounce and the pound. Retailers can continue to display the equivalent imperial units next to metric units for indicating the weight (eg on weighing machine scales) and the price (eg x per kilogram/ y per pound) of goods, provided that the imperial units are not indicated more prominently than the metric units.

Many consumers will no doubt continue to express in ounces and pounds the quantity they wish to buy. Where this happens retailers should weight out the equivalent quantity in grams and kilograms (the Weights and Measures Act 1985 defines the avoirdupois pound as being equivalent to just under 454 grams). This would be similar to the practice in France, where a request for a "livre" (pound) is understood to be a request for 500 grams.

The supermarket chains - which account for 80 per cent of sales of loose goods - have already made the change or are in the process of doing so. To assist small retailers and their customers the DTI has issued free leaflets with information and advice and a wall chart of weight comparisons. The DTI has also set up a helpline for further advice. I enclose copies of the retailer and consumer leaflets.

As with the earlier stages of metrication, I expect the latest change to take place without difficulty. This has certainly been the experience in shops where metric units are now in use for loose goods.

*Y
Lynn*

Rina