



Local Authority feedback on Scores on the Doors schemes (July 2007)

Workshop notes for the Food Standards Agency

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This note

This note provides a summary of feedback and opinions expressed by Local Authority (LA) representatives and a small number of representatives from stakeholder organisations at a series of 7 workshops regarding scores on the doors (SOTD) held in July 2007 by Greenstreet Berman Ltd and the Food Standards Agency at:

- Bristol;
- London x 2;
- Birmingham x 2;
- Edinburgh x 2.

In total 100 delegates attended the sessions, representing 94 Local Authorities.

This note provides a synthesis of feedback. The feedback will be used to inform the ongoing comparative evaluation of SOTD schemes.

The workshops included a discussion of experience to date with schemes, the reasoning behind schemes and lessons learnt. The feedback is primarily subjective and qualitative.

In all cases (unless otherwise stated) the opinions reported here are those of delegates, summarised in an aggregated manner.

2 SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

2.1 Overview

2.1.1 Key points

Some key points include:

1. The vast majority of delegates are positive about their SOTD schemes and are confident that they are delivering worthwhile and cost-effective benefits.
2. The main aims include improving food hygiene standards, informing customers, reducing Freedom of Information (FOI) enquiries, promoting self-compliance and alternative enforcement amongst businesses and raising profile of Environmental Health Professional work.
3. The extent to which the scheme is intended to lead to improve hygiene varies, with some schemes operated as part of a wider initiative aimed at encouraging and enabling business improvement.
4. The extent to which the scheme operates alongside and as part of business support activities is as important a difference between schemes as the difference in the type of scale and symbols used.
5. Most LAs cite few resource problems related to the operation of SOTD, excepting some difficulties during initial launch of schemes - Some LAs report a reduction in work due to:
 - o A decline in A and B risk businesses;
 - o A decline in FOI enquiries.

There is minimal impact on inspection programmes and little additional work involved once the scheme is in operation.

Some LAs state that they encounter difficulty in undertaking any additional work or incurring even minimal costs as part of SOTD.

6. Opinions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of alternative SOTD schemes are very diverse and conflicting. Questions are raised about the design of every scheme.
7. Key success factors include securing and maintaining positive media attention, publicity of the scheme, an effective website, accurate inspection data and records, achieving a critical mass of displayed certificates, ensuring businesses understand the scheme (especially scoring process).

The general tone is that LAs should not delay the launch of schemes due to concerns about potential problems, as the problems rarely materialise, and the schemes offer many benefits without creating any significant resourcing problems.

Finally, there was widespread support for a national scheme to be introduced for the sake of consistency, achieving critical mass of public awareness and easing consumer comprehension by having one scheme across the nation.

2.1.2 Questions arising from feedback

There are, as elaborated below, some major differences in feedback on the following points:

1. Is a star scheme preferable because it is similar to quality schemes or does this similarity lead to confusion?
2. What level of information should be provided on certificates?
3. Does 6 grades lead to regulatory creep and overly sensitive scales, or do fewer grades (e.g. 0 to 3) fail to provide an incentive to improve and fail to represent spread of performance?
4. Should the first certificate be issued using past or current inspection scores?
5. To what extent should advice and support, including revisits, be offered as part of SOTD to promote improvement in hygiene standards?
6. To what extent is SOTD aimed at informing customers or promoting improvement in standards?
7. To what extent do you consult business and publicise the scheme before it is launched?
8. What score should be used for 'acceptable' grades (e.g. 2 stars out of 5)? Options include 40, 45 and 50.

A key issue cited by the evaluators is to what extent do the scales/descriptors used need to allow businesses to feel that they wish to display a middle range score equivalent to broadly compliant, if the scheme is going to achieve the goal of informing the public?

Other questions raised by delegates included:

- Should the display of certificates be made mandatory, to assure their display?
- Should a single software package be provided by the FSA for use in displaying scores on websites?

2.2 What are the main aims of scores on the doors schemes?

2.2.1 Main aims

Delegates cited two main objectives, each of which had subsidiary and related objectives namely:

1. To improve standards of food hygiene in businesses – related aims included:
 - To provide a driver for Safer Food For Better Business or other similar schemes;
 - To provide recognition and reward of good performance- 'show and glow';
 - To create competition amongst businesses;
 - To generate peer pressure amongst businesses;
 - To encourage a healthy community.

It is suggested, by a few delegates, that awards schemes¹ only include the ‘best’ or ‘better’ performers, and do not provide a progression route for the majority of businesses in the way that scores on the doors schemes do. This, namely the operation of a scores on the doors scheme, in turn is hoped to lead to a reduction in cases of foodborne illness. However, it is thought that it is not practical to measure or assess impacts on rates of foodborne illness and so no authority cites a reduction in foodborne illness as a measurable aim.

2. To inform customers

This aim had a number of aspects, including:

- Enabling informed consumer choice;
- Fulfilling freedom of information duties;
- Increase consumer confidence.

2.2.2 Weight attached to key aims

The weight attached to these two main aims differs across Authorities:

- Some place equal weight on both aims;
- Some, a minority, are primarily aimed at informing customers, with improvements in hygiene standards regarded to be a (beneficial) side effect;
- A minority primarily aim to improve hygiene standards –as that is the core aim of Environmental Health.

In many cases the view is taken that the two aims are interwoven, with customer engagement in SOTD being a factor in whether the schemes provide a business incentive.

2.2.3 Other aims

Delegates cited other important aims. These included:

3. Reducing the number of Freedom of Information queries.

The need to reduce the number of FOI enquiries was cited by a significant number of authorities as a key reason for introducing SOTD. In one case it was the sole reason.

¹ Award schemes tend to recognise businesses that go beyond legal compliance and are entirely voluntary for businesses, whilst scores on the doors schemes apply hygiene inspection scores and hence measure compliance with the law.

The aim is to reduce the time incurred by LAs in responding to FOI enquiries by providing information on a publicly accessible website. As part of this the aim is to provide information in a format and to a certain level of detail that is both useful and can be comprehended by members of the public. This leads to the idea of translating hygiene scores into a simple scale.

The extent to which additional information is provided online varies, with most focusing on hygiene scores, with additional information provided on request.

4. Supporting alternative forms of enforcement

In a minority of cases delegates suggested that SOTD may help, in the longer term, to reduce the number of inspections (as a result of improving standards) and reduce the number of A risk businesses.

The aims of this include allowing inspectors to focus on higher risk businesses. However, in some cases a strong view was expressed that traditional enforcement approaches can create an attitude of dependency amongst 'poor' performing businesses where they:

- Await inspectors' directions before making improvements;
- Become 'used to' receiving improvement notices and are not prompted by enforcement to make substantive or sustained improvements;
- Fail to take ownership of food hygiene management.

In these cases the LA expressed the view that SOTD is being introduced as part of a shift from enforcement driven compliance to an 'encourage and mentor' approach. SOTD is augmented by written and verbal advice, mentoring visits etc. The scores are explained and advice provided on how to improve standards. The public display of the certificates (and listing on websites) is used as an incentive for businesses to take on 'ownership' of hygiene standards.

5. Raising public and awareness of environmental health activities.

In some cases it was hoped that the scheme would provide a higher level of public awareness of the work (and the benefits) of environmental health work amongst businesses and general public, and that this would help raise EHP profile within LAs and amongst councillors.

2.3 Outcomes of schemes

The outcomes cited by delegates included:

1. The majority of delegates indicated that, sometimes contrary to expectations, there were very few complaints or appeals, and that litigation was a rare exception (only one case cited during 7 workshops with about 94 LAs).
2. Positive business feedback on the scheme in many, but not all cases. Feedback is better where the LAs consulted with businesses and advised them of their scores prior to posting them on websites etc.
3. There is a reasonable level of business engagement with the schemes, with a mixed pattern:

- Some LAs indicate that businesses with lower grades do not aim to improve, due to lack of commitment and a perception that their customers do not care enough about hygiene standards;
 - Some LAs indicate that businesses with middle grades aim to improve, as they perceive the possibility of higher grades that they can advertise;
 - Some LAs indicate that businesses with lower grades have improved the most, with large falls in the number of category A businesses. This is associated by some of these LAs with the focusing of advice and mentoring onto these businesses, provided as part of a strategy to improve the poorer performers.
4. SOTD has helped to promote Safer Food for better business.
 5. The standard and consistency of scoring by inspectors significantly improves due to the heightened sense of accountability arising from the public display of scores. This is reported to lead to spontaneous and active peer review between inspectors regarding hygiene scores.
 6. A reduction in FOI enquiries.
 7. Inspection databases are 'cleaned up' and updated, to ensure that the right score is issued to the right business and has the correct business details on the certificate.
 8. Businesses approach the LA to register as a food business in order to be inspected and receive a certificate.
 9. Members of the public and councillors become more aware of the activity and importance of food safety inspectors.

2.4 Why did you choose your type of scale?

2.4.1 Overview

All delegates had well formed reasons for the selection and design of their schemes, and tended to cite strong arguments for their scheme. At the same time, the schemes differ greatly in their design, and delegates expressed diametrically opposing opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of each scheme.

LAs report public consultations that advocate:

- 0 to 5 stars;
- Gold, silver, bronze;
- Traffic lights.

Other LAs report positive feedback on smiley faces and pass-improvement required.

LAs argue for and against star schemes respectively on the grounds that its use for quality will either make it familiar to people or lead to confusion between quality and hygiene star schemes.

There is strong support for consistency between LAs for the sake of supporting consumer comprehension of schemes.

The key issues regarding scales include:

- The type of symbol used;
- The number of grades (2, 3, 4 or 6);
- Whether to have a single overall score or one for each of hygiene compliance, structural compliance and confidence in management;
- The alignment of scores to the certificate grade.

2.4.2 Star schemes

0 to 5 star schemes are the most common. These schemes are adopted for the following reasons:

- A view that customers are familiar with 5 star rating schemes, as per the quality rating scheme for hotels, and so will understand it;
- Only a few percentages of businesses get 5 stars and so it is motivational;
- A wish for the scheme to be recognisable alongside other schemes;
- A wish to be consistent with neighbouring LAs;
- Consumer consultation indicating a preference for a 5 star scheme;
- The LA wanted to choose a scheme that the majority of people were adopting. Their reasons were that consumers were more likely to understand the schemes no matter where they were in the country.

Some LAs put the word Hygiene onto the certificate to ensure it is not confused with quality marks.

The following reasons for not using a star scheme were given:

- A view that customers may confuse it with other 5 star rating schemes;
- Hotelier feedback stated that they do not want another 5 star rating scheme;
- Consumer consultation indicating a preference for other schemes.

2.4.3 Non-star schemes

The reasons cited for other schemes include:

- Smiley faces match the needs of a multi-lingual population;
- Gold silver and bronze is simple and avoids confusion with other star 'quality' schemes;
- A to E rating allows progression;
- Traffic lights build on public recognition and comprehension of nutrition signpost, as well as avoiding another star scheme.

Some schemes add words, such as poor, as they are thought to help consumers understand the meaning of the symbol, as well as helping people with colour blindness.

2.4.4 0 to 5 vs. fewer grades

Arguments for 0 to 5

A larger number of grades (i.e. 0 to 5) is argued for due to:

- It provides a greater incentive to businesses as they have more grades to progress to;
- More grades clearly moves away from awards schemes;
- LAs want the option of awarding zero to the poorest performers;
- Six grades provide a better and truer representation of the range of performance amongst businesses;
- If you have fewer grades, e.g. 3 grades, the middle grade can encompass a very wide range of standards, and is not discriminating enough;
- If you have fewer grades, e.g. 3 grades, businesses may need to make substantial improvements before they can move up a grade, whilst with a 6 grade system they can achieve a higher grade more rapidly and so are more motivated to do so.

In addition, some schemes display empty stars (e.g. 3 full and 2 blank stars) in order to ensure people understand that it is 3 out of 5. The concern is that if only 3 stars are on display (with no blanks) people may not realise that the business can achieve more than 3 stars.

Arguments against 0 to 5 (and for 0 to 3 or 1 to 3 grades)

The six grades on the 0 to 5 star scheme is argued against for the following reasons:

- It is difficult for small businesses and family businesses to achieve 5 stars, skewing the scheme against small businesses;
- Some 'very good' premises do not get 5 stars;
- Some LAs do not issue certificates for 0, 1 or 2 stars on the assumption they will not be displayed – undermining the public information objective of the scheme;
- A six stage scheme is sensitive (a small change in score leads to a change in grade), which raises concern about the legal defensibility of the scores;
- A 6 star scheme may lead to regulatory creep, promoting beyond compliance, especially if the LAs or inspector interprets the code of practice to mean that external auditing is needed for 5 star grade;
- A 2 star grade is not displayed, as it is perceived by the business that 2 out of 5 is 'poor' despite it equating to broadly compliant²;
- A 0 to 5 star scheme rewards poor performers, who get 1 or 2 stars, instead of being awarded the bottom grade on a 3 grade scheme.

A 3 grade scheme is argued for on grounds that:

² 2 out of 5 is 'broadly compliant' in the London 0 to 5 star scheme. Other 0 to 5 star schemes use slightly different alignments of scores to stars.

- It is easier to defend, as it is less sensitive;
- It does allow progression beyond 'broadly compliant';
- It avoids regulatory creep.

Two grades

A two grade scheme (pass-improvement required) is argued for on the grounds that:

- It fulfils the needs of customers to be advised that the business has been inspected and 'passed' as safe;
- It is simple;
- It does not represent or reward graduated failure, i.e. businesses that fall below 'broadly compliant' are treated as a single category rather than splitting grades of 'failure'.

The pass-improvement required gradation is advocated where the aim of SOTD is primarily one of informing customers rather than improving hygiene standards. In addition, the pass-improvement required scheme operates in Scotland (but not in Greenwich) at the same time as award schemes that recognise beyond regulatory standards.

3 by 3 star schemes

Some schemes award stars for each of hygiene compliance, structural compliance and confidence in management, rather than a single overall grade. This is argued for due to:

- Wishing to avoid another 5 star process;
- A wish to indicate performance in each area.

A 3 grade scale is used in those cases where stars are awarded for each of the 3 components, to avoid overcomplicating the certificate.

At least one LA had switched from a 3 by 3 star scheme (to a 0 to 5 star scheme) due to concern that the certificate looks too complex. Other LAs also expressed a concern that having three scales may be too complex for members of the public.

2.4.5 Other information on display

Information on certificates

The amount and type of information contained on certificates ranges between schemes. Some examples include:

- At least one scheme presents the two previous inspection scores graphically to demonstrate progress over time. This is regarded to be a very good feature of the certificate by the LA.
- The provision of a summary of inspection observations – good and bad. This is reported to have (against expectation in some cases) been well received and positively commented on by consumers.
- The period of validity of the certificate;
- Date inspection occurred;
- Certificate reference number;

- An explanation of the scale and scoring process.

At least one LA provides a leaflet at each inspection to explain the scheme and scoring process.

It is considered to be important to explain the scoring process at the point of sale rather than just on the website.

Information on website

Most schemes publish limited information on websites, such as the score and certificate grade. Some display the inspection report on the website. There are concerns about publishing full reports and inspection letters as the length of the report may not reflect the standards, as well as incurring additional work.

2.5 Processes

2.5.1 Re-visits, re-certification and business support

LAs differ greatly in respect of:

- Whether re-visits are carried out in between primary inspections for sake of re-scoring;
- The level of advice, support and mentoring provided to businesses to help them improve their scores.

Those LAs that do not offer re-visits focus on LA resource concerns and debate the extent to which the scheme is intended to promote business improvement.

No revisit approach

In some cases certificates are only issued after a primary inspection, with no option for revisits, and no additional support offered to businesses as part of SOTD. This approach is argued for due to:

- A need to avoid SOTD driving up the inspection workload, with a wish that SOTD is achieved solely through current programmed inspection with no additional work needed;
- An assumption that poor businesses will not improve in between primary inspections;
- A and B risk businesses will be re-inspected after 6 and 12 months respectively, which is not too long;
- If SOTD is aimed primarily at public information then it is simply a matter of informing people of the scores rather than supporting business improvement.
- At least one LA noted that during consultation businesses strongly argued for revisits, but accepted a 'no revisit' policy upon implementation.

In some cases the LAs argue that they provide a 'right of reply' facility on the scores website where the business can reply to their score. This is said to address some of the reasons for revisits.

Revisit approach

Those authorities that offer revisits tend to also offer business support such as advice and mentoring. In some cases SOTD is viewed as part of a wider strategy to encourage and support businesses, as a shift away from enforcement based compliance. This can involve:

- Promoting Safer Food for better business ‘on the back’ of SOTD as a means of achieving better scores;
- Mentoring lower grade businesses;
- Explaining during inspections actions needed to secure a better grade;
- Doing revisits in between primary inspections for sake of awarding new certificates.

These authorities argue that the ability of businesses to be re-scored for the sake of a new certificate is essential to the success of the scheme, at least with respect to motivating businesses.

In these cases it is argued that:

- In order for a certificate to act as an incentive, businesses need to be offered the option of a new certificate once they have achieved improvements. If improvements are achieved within a few months of an inspection businesses will operate with ‘out of date’ certificates for varying periods of time, namely: A risk operate to 3 to 4 months with an ‘out of date’ certificate, B risk about 9 months and C risk for over one year. If you need to wait for over 1 year for improvements to be recognised in the form of a new certificate this will reduce the incentive offered by the scheme to businesses.
- If you succeed in motivating self compliance and improvement, the number of programmed inspections declines and so you can re-focus resources onto supporting poorer business through re-visits etc;
- Once businesses recognise the potential impact of publicly displayed certificates (or websites) they tend to be motivated to seek advice and support to improve. This is an opportunity for the LA to encourage and enable self-improvement amongst businesses, through re-visits etc.

It is also argued that:

- In the case of lower grade businesses, revisits are likely to be carried out anyhow to check implementation of actions arising from the inspection;
- The actual number of revisits arising from SOTD is low
- The work load involved in revisits can be reduced by checking over the telephone whether a business has addressed actions arising from inspections, before a re-visit is scheduled. This reduces the frequency of re-visiting businesses, for sake of recertification, that have not actually made all necessary improvements.

In addition, if the certificate is not updated after a business has made improvements, this means that members of the public are being provided with an out of date view of the business.

Finally, one scheme that primarily aims to inform consumers still provides re-visits to businesses on the grounds of being ‘fair’ to those businesses that have addressed inspection actions. The opportunity for re-visits was a condition stipulated by business groups for their agreement to the scheme.

2.5.2 Issuing the first certificate

Schemes vary in the approach to issuing the first certificate:

1. Some issue certificates en mass to businesses using the last primary inspection score;
2. Some issue certificates only on the basis of the rolling inspection programme. Some variations to this option are:
 - To bring forward inspections for a type of business, such as takeaways, so that they all have a certificate in a short period of time;
 - Carry out inspections of all businesses in one area.

The first option is thought to have the advantage of creating a critical mass of certificates that encourages their display. However, this approach is challenged on the grounds that the last primary inspection may no longer be representative of the business, and may not be perceived as valid by the business who may not then display it.

The second option offers an advantage of a current valid score and the opportunity to explain the scheme and how to achieve a better score during the inspection that leads to the first certificate. If inspections are focused on an area this achieves the critical mass effect of option 1.

2.5.3 Issuing lower grade certificates

Some LAs do not distribute (or print) lower grade certificates (e.g. 0, 1 or 2 stars on the 0 to 5 scheme) on the assumption they will not be displayed. They instead write to the business and advise them of their score.

Some LAs distribute all grades of certificates.

2.5.4 Achieving consistency

First it is important to note that many LAs report that the introduction of SOTD has acted as a prompt for inspectors to achieve more consistency in their scoring due to the higher level of perceived accountability arising from publication of scores. Inspectors are thought to be more discerning in their scoring rather than “giving the business 10 10 10”.

Consistency is thought to be an important issue. However, few LAs cited any problems with consistency.

Approaches to assuring consistency include:

- Attending consistency training;
- Doing joint visits to businesses as part of training exercise;
- Peer review;
- Every ‘low’ score is peer reviewed.

2.6 Lessons learnt

The lessons learnt cited by delegates fell into the following themes.

2.6.1 Media engagement

It is reported that positive (local) media coverage can play an effective role in alerting businesses and consumers to the scheme and encouraging business participation. Positive coverage includes where media cite stories of businesses that have received the top grade, possibly with quotes from the business, i.e. where the coverage is a 'show and glow' of businesses. One LA noted that they thought this could be achieved by encouraging local businesses to contact the media directly when they have received a top score. Other examples include having a list of businesses and their grades in the local paper.

Positive media coverage is said to be more likely to be achieved if the LA approaches the media and advocates a positive line and provides examples.

However, media coverage can be negative, particularly where a 'name and shame' approach is adopted. This can occur despite LAs promoting a positive line. This can lead to a negative image of the scheme, with businesses perceiving it as a 'punishment' rather than recognition of good performance.

2.6.2 Business consultation

Some LAs agree that it is imperative to consult local businesses and give them prior notice (through letters and publicity) of the design and operation of the scheme, to minimise adverse feedback on launching the scheme.

2.6.3 Range of businesses to include in the scheme

A number of LAs indicated that if the scheme includes businesses that are not commonly perceived by members of the public as food businesses, this can undermine public confidence in the scheme. Examples included chemists, off licences and newsagents. The concern is greatest where a business such as a newsagent receives a better score than a business such as a restaurant.

It is suggested that businesses such as nurseries should be included due to public concern.

Therefore, many LAs indicate that they focus certification on businesses that have food as their main activity, such as takeaways, restaurants and caterers.

2.6.4 Display of 'lower' grade certificates

A number of LAs indicate that businesses are reluctant to display 'lower' grade scores. This includes 0, 1 or 2 stars in 0 to 5 star schemes, even where 2 stars equates to broadly compliant. It is suggested from business feedback to LAs that this is due to a perception that customers will view 2 out of 5 stars to be a 'poor' rating and may deter customers.

A similar concern was expressed for other schemes.

Delegates indicate that it is uncertain whether the pressure on businesses to display certificates will increase with time when the number of certificates on display increases.

2.6.5 Business complaints and enquiries

As noted under outcomes, many LAs indicated that they received far fewer complaints or adverse enquiries from businesses on launch of the scheme than expected. In most cases the number of complaints and adverse enquiries was considered to be very low, with a few exceptions.

It was also indicated that many businesses, especially those with lower scores, do query their rating. However, once the scoring process is explained along with the findings of the inspection, the businesses do tend to accept the result. The exceptions are where the business owner argues that the responsible person was not present at the time of the inspection, and so the businesses hygiene management was not properly represented, or that the problems have now been rectified.

One LA noted that whilst FOI initially declined on launch of SOTD that there are now a growing number of requests for the full reports that lead to the scores.

2.6.6 Piloting

There may be some advantage in piloting a scheme in part of the LA or region, in order to identify and resolve operational problems, before the scheme is launched and publicised on a wider basis.

2.6.7 Customer response to detailed information

Against expectations some LAs found that customers did read and applaud the provision of information about the inspection observations on the certificate.

2.6.8 Cleaning up inspection databases

If the LA issues the first certificates on basis of the last primary inspection, this requires the food business databases to be thoroughly checked and corrected, to avoid issuing wrong grade to a business. This can be a significant task.

It is considered critical to use accurate information to assure the scheme is perceived as valid by businesses.

2.6.9 Websites

A searchable website is seen to be an important facility and should be prioritised. The provision of filter functions (by area, type of business, grade etc) is considered important. A regional website is also judged to be preferable as it corresponds to consumer behaviour (i.e. consumers do not limit themselves to any one LA when choosing venues).

It is also suggested that website accessibility is important. If people need to search through a website to find the scores page this may deter use, whilst a website dedicated to scores on the doors is easier to find and navigate.

It is reported that websites enjoy a very large number of hits. However, there is uncertainty regarding whether the number of hits provide a true measure of use, as hits relate to opening pages rather than individual user sessions.