

Conclusions

However, it is difficult to isolate how much the pandemic has had an impact on survey results. Certainly, key measures – for example around awareness of and attitudes towards the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme – have remained largely consistent over time.

Food hygiene remains highly important to businesses, who value its role in enhancing their reputation and attracting customers. The scheme also clearly drives change, with around four in five businesses who received a rating of less than 5 taking action to improve their hygiene rating at the next inspection (England: 87%; Northern Ireland: 78%; Wales: 82%).

In England, the most notable finding is that there continues to be a lower level of display compared to Wales and Northern Ireland although there is a gradual upward trend in the number of businesses displaying their food hygiene rating sticker (from 55% in 2017 to 64% in 2021). Among those not displaying a sticker, a higher rating was the most commonly identified factor that would encourage display (18%) and around one in ten said they would display a sticker if it was a legal requirement (9%).

While display rates in Northern Ireland (84%) and Wales (85%) are significantly higher – no doubt due to display being mandatory – there is reason to continue to monitor display rates carefully. Display rates (either inside or in a location visible from outside) have fallen (from 89%) since 2019 in Northern Ireland, although they are in line with longer-term results. And in Wales the proportion displaying the correct statutory sticker was also down since 2019 (from 91%).

The reduction in the proportion of Northern Irish and Welsh businesses displaying an FHRS sticker in a location visible from outside their premises should be considered in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, Local Authorities were required to defer the routine inspection of many food businesses and focus resource on the most high-risk establishments. Consequently, there was less opportunity for inspectors to check non-display of rating stickers and prompt businesses to correct this. There was also considerable upheaval in the food industry during the pandemic, with many businesses temporarily closing and changing management and/or ownership.

There is a higher level of support in England for mandatory display than has been seen in previous years, with 85% of businesses in favour. There are also very high levels of support in England (91%), Northern Ireland (93%) and Wales (94%) for the display of food hygiene ratings becoming mandatory on at least some online platforms. This presents a clear demand for regulatory action.

Overall, most businesses are incentivised to maintain or improve their food hygiene rating and consider that the display of their rating has a range of positive impacts on consumer perceptions of the business. Across each country, practically all businesses that displayed their food hygiene rating said they work hard to maintain or improve it (England: 99%; Northern Ireland: 99%; Wales 98%) and agreed that displaying a food hygiene rating shows customers that they take food hygiene seriously (England: 98%; Northern Ireland: 97%; Wales 97%). It was also widely felt that having a higher food hygiene rating gave businesses a competitive advantage over those with lower ratings (England: 83%; Northern Ireland: 80%; Wales 81%).

The message that displaying a food hygiene rating gives a competitive advantage over other businesses could be used to encourage more businesses to promote their ratings in advertisements, menus etc. or online. Use of food hygiene ratings to promote businesses remains relatively low (England: 21%; Northern Ireland: 23%; Wales: 24%) although many claim that they would consider doing so in the future (England: 41%; Northern Ireland: 41%; Wales: 38%).