

Value of FHRs Consumer Research: Executive Summary

Results available: Results available

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Background and objectives

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is responsible for food safety across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. As part of its work on the Achieving Business Compliance (ABC) programme, the FSA wanted to understand in more detail how LAs (LAs), businesses and consumers feel about the current Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS). In addition, the FSA wanted to capture consumer views on potential changes to the regulatory approach. To this purpose, the FSA commissioned Ipsos UK to conduct qualitative research to explore consumers' views to:

1. Assess the value of the FHRS scheme according to consumers.
2. Assess consumer views of possible areas of change in regulatory approach.

Method and sample

This research report provides findings from four reconvened online discussion groups conducted with consumers in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The research with consumers consisted of two parts, reflecting the research objectives:

- Objective 1: Assessing the value of the FHRS.
- Objective 2: Assessing consumer views of possible areas of change in regulatory approach.

During the first online workshop, participants discussed their attitudes towards the FHRS. The workshop groups were reconvened one week after the first session. The reconvened workshops focused on exploring consumer views on wider potential changes in regulatory approaches for food hygiene and safety. Here, participants discussed six scenarios that set out possible areas of change to the approach to regulating food hygiene and safety in future. They were asked to consider the impact of these potential changes, including any benefits or concerns.

Key findings

Objective 1: Assessing the value of the FHRS

Awareness of the FHRS

Awareness of the FHRS varied considerably across participants:

- those who knew more about the FHRs associated the scheme with checking food safety and hygiene ratings before deciding where to buy food. These participants were more concerned about food safety and hygiene and the risks of becoming ill. Participants with higher levels of awareness consistently discussed ratings being based on inspections that covered issues including cleanliness, storage, and how kitchens are managed.
- other participants were less aware of the FHRs. They also associated the scheme with the ratings stickers displayed by food businesses but did not tend to use the ratings when making decisions. They had limited understanding of how the ratings were decided, or what the ratings meant beyond the best and worst scores.

Perceived value of the FHRs for consumers

Across all groups, the extent to which participants used and valued the FHRs varied. While participants generally acknowledged the value of the FHRs and FHRs ratings, and many used the scheme, other considerations were also mentioned by participants when choosing where to buy food from.

- participants considered FHRs rating stickers as a source of trustworthy, independent information about the food hygiene standards in a business. Those who were more concerned about food safety and hygiene, mentioned using the scheme to check ratings and avoid lower-rated businesses as a way of reducing the risks when purchasing food from restaurants and takeaways. Across groups, participants also valued the general reassurance offered by the scheme that food safety and hygiene standards were being regularly assessed in food businesses.
- on the other hand, participants often described the FHRs ratings as making little difference to their decisions about buying food from different kinds of businesses – including takeaways, supermarkets, cafes, and restaurants – even if they were familiar with the scheme. Other considerations, including participants' personal experience of a food business and the availability of choice in their area, were of greater importance.
- participants also discussed the value offered by regular inspections. They reflected on ratings that were based on inspections that happened several years ago and expressed concern about these ratings potentially not reflecting current food safety practices.

Consumer awareness and expectations of businesses included in the FHRs scheme

- participants generally agreed that if a business sells, handles, or prepares food, they would expect it to be part of the scheme. This included restaurants, cafes, takeaways, and food retailers. When probed, participants expected the FHRs to also apply to institutions like schools, care homes, and hospitals.
- there was more uncertainty about whether supermarkets were included in the scheme. Participants with a greater awareness of the FHRs were more likely to expect supermarkets to be included in the scheme. However, they generally said they would not check a supermarket's rating before purchasing from a store.
- participants liked the simplicity of having all food businesses included in the scheme. Regulating all food businesses on the same basis was also seen as an important way to make the scheme easy for consumers to use.
- however, there were mixed opinions about businesses considered to be 'low risk' by participants, and whether they should be included in the scheme. Many participants suggested that businesses selling pre-packaged food that do not require chilling (e.g. chemist selling sweets) did not need to be covered by the scope of the FHRs.

Consumer attitudes to the mandatory display of ratings

- across the discussions, participants consistently agreed that displaying FHRs ratings should be mandatory across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. They felt this was important for several reasons, including maintaining food safety standards, transparency, and fairness for people living in different places.
- however, there was mixed awareness of whether FHRs ratings had to be displayed by food businesses. In Wales and Northern Ireland, participants generally assumed that ratings had to be displayed. However, participants across all three nations were generally not aware that scores are voluntary to display in England. This was often viewed by participants as limiting the potential value and effectiveness of the scheme.
- participants assumed that establishments with a low score would be unlikely to display their score if it were not mandatory to do so. There was concern that consumers may be at risk from eating food from food businesses with a low rating without being aware that the business was not complying with standards as well as they should be.

Frequency of inspections

- participants generally expected that food businesses would be inspected regularly – with expectations ranging from a few times a year to every two years. They associated food businesses with a risk to consumers and to public health, and wanted reassurance that inspections were happening frequently enough to identify any issues.
- some participants across all groups felt that the inspection frequency should be the same for all businesses because of the potential risks to consumers. They believed that every business selling food to the public should be treated the same, noting that this approach was simpler and clearer.
- however, other participants felt there should be some variation in inspection frequency, and this view was again held across all three nations. They suggested basing this on business type and previous compliance and saw this as a way of prioritising resources.

Objective 2: Assessing consumer views of possible areas of change in regulatory approach

Participants were asked about six potential changes to the regulatory approach. These were introduced through scenarios, setting out the potential change and what it might mean for specific businesses. Full details of the scenarios can be found in Chapter 4.

The potential use of an independent audit for assurance:

- participants were open to the idea of using third-party independent audits and internal audits. Participants thought this had the potential to free up resources to focus on higher risk or less compliant businesses. However, they wanted the FSA to oversee this to ensure inspectors carrying out independent audits were appropriately skilled and trained.
- participants reflected on similar approaches from other sectors, for example social care and medical services, and expressed concern about third-party staff potentially not having the same high standards as the FSA.

Changes to the method of inspection, including making use of remote assessments:

- participants were strongly against remote inspections as an alternative to physical inspections, particularly for businesses that prepare fresh food. They raised concerns about the limitations of video checks and worried this would allow businesses to hide problems. Participants were also worried about inspectors not being able to rely on their senses during remote inspections to identify any potential problems.

- some participants recognised the potential of remote inspections to provide significant cost and time savings. However, this was not seen as sufficient justification for not visiting businesses, including those that are compliant.

Removing some lower risk businesses from the inspection regime:

- although they had previously discussed very low risk businesses being removed from the FHRs, participants were concerned about removing businesses like corner shops. Most participants were worried that businesses might see this as 'permission' for food hygiene standards to fall. They also assumed smaller businesses lacked the resources to implement internal checks similar to those used by larger retailers.
- some were open to this potential change, but this was not a common view. These participants felt corner shops, which they perceived as being lower risk food businesses, could be removed from the scheme, providing the FSA with the opportunity to focus resources on higher risk businesses (e.g. cafes, takeaways, restaurants).

Reducing inspection for inherently high risk businesses with a consistently good track record of compliance:

- many participants supported using a reduced inspection regime as an incentive to recognise compliant businesses and encourage them to maintain high standards. There was also more openness to the idea of using remote inspections in this context, allowing physical inspections to be reduced, but not replaced.
- however, some participants queried how often inspections and remote inspections should happen. This was linked to overall views about wanting inspections to happen more often.
- participants felt that any change in management or high turnover of staff should see a business removed from this approach, to ensure standards are being monitored.

Using other FSA approved assurance schemes to reduce frequency of interventions:

- participants recognised the benefits around reduced inspection costs and freeing up resources. They were reassured that the business would still be subject to regular inspections and emphasised the need for these alternative assurance schemes to operate to the same standards and be overseen by the FSA.
- however, some were concerned this could lead to a lack of clarity about accountability for issues between different stakeholders such as Red Tractor, the FSA, and LAs. Participants also mentioned the importance of ensuring that consumers were aware of the alternative schemes, through awareness campaigns.

Supermarkets and other large or multi-site businesses assessed as a whole business, rather than as individual stores:

- views were mixed on this potential change. Some participants felt this would reduce costs and enable a focus on other higher risk businesses. However, other participants raised concerns about poor performing premises benefitting from an overall rating that did not reflect their practices.
- participants recognised that larger businesses had internal teams responsible for food hygiene practices and that for these types of businesses there is a reputational risk and interest to ensure standards are kept. They discussed the effectiveness of internal audits compared with external visits, and highlighted difficulties in assessing a large chain without visiting all sites.
- participants also worried about fairness for smaller businesses if larger competitors had a different inspection regime.