

Value of FHRs Consumer Research: Chapter 5 Conclusions

Objective 1: Assessing the value of the FHRs for consumers

The FHRs were seen as valuable by many consumers, although awareness and use varied. FHRs ratings were seen as a source of trustworthy information about food hygiene standards, providing consumers with reassurance about food safety. Familiarity with a food business and amount of local choice were more important for some when choosing where to eat.

Those who knew more about the FHRs relied on checking food safety and hygiene ratings as an important consideration when deciding where to buy food. They were more likely to know that inspections could cover issues like cleanliness, storage, and kitchen management.

Those who were less aware of the FHRs associated the scheme with ratings stickers displayed by food businesses – but did not tend to rely on these when choosing where to buy food. These participants had a limited understanding of how ratings were decided, or what exactly ratings meant.

There was general agreement that businesses that sell, handle, or prepare food should be part of the scheme. Participants emphasised the importance of managing consumer risk and saw the FHRs as an important way of doing so. Including all food businesses on the same basis was generally seen as an important way to make the scheme simpler for consumers to use. However, there were mixed views about very low risk food businesses (for example, that only sold pre-packaged food) being included in the scope of the FHRs.

Participants consistently agreed that displaying FHRs ratings should be mandatory, associating this with fairness and transparency. However, there was limited awareness across the three nations that display of ratings is not mandatory in England.

Participants assumed that food businesses were inspected regularly, with expectations ranging from a few times a year to every few years. There were mixed opinions about whether inspection frequency should be the same for all businesses. Many participants thought that inspection frequency should be the same for all businesses. However, some participants suggested varying inspection frequency based 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. They had some concerns about changing the FHRs given the value they placed on inspections and ratings. However, they were open to some potential changes where these were not seen to increase risks to consumers.

- participants were open to the idea of using third-party independent audits and internal audits. However, they wanted the FSA to oversee this to ensure inspectors carrying out independent audits were appropriately skilled and trained.

- participants were strongly against the use of remote inspections as an alternative to physical inspections, particularly for businesses that prepare fresh food because they thought this approach would allow businesses to hide problems.
- 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 concerned that businesses might see this as 'permission' for food hygiene standards to fall.
- many participants supported using reduced inspections 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.
- participants recognised the benefits of using FSA approved assurance schemes to reduce frequency of inspections, particularly in lowering inspection costs and freeing up resources. They emphasised the need for these alternative assurance schemes to operate to the same standards and be overseen by the FSA.
- views were mixed on assessing supermarkets and other large or multi-site businesses as a whole business, rather than as individual stores. Some participants felt this would reduce costs and enable a focus on other higher risk businesses. Others raised concerns about poor performing premises benefitting from an overall rating that did not reflect their practices.