

Value of FHRs Business Research: Chapter 6

What improvements do businesses suggest to the scheme?

Overall views on whether improvements are needed

Businesses were asked to suggest improvements that they would like to see made to the current FHRs scheme. It is worth noting that most businesses described the current scheme as working well, and often struggled to suggest specific improvements. This was particularly the case for small businesses. Instead, any suggested improvements tended to focus on smaller amendments to make the scheme more effective in achieving its objectives.

“I think the scheme is run well, as I keep saying it sets a standard for your kitchen and your hygiene and your staff, and everybody has to follow the same standards. So no, I don't have an issue with it at all.”

(Wales, small business (<10 employees), 5 FHRs rating)

“I don't think there's that much wrong with the scheme as it is.”

(Northern Ireland, small business (10-24 employees), 5 FHRs rating)

“Well, I would like this scheme to remain. I think it's really positive for businesses. Also it's good for the public to see they are walking into a nice, clean, hygienic shop. It's good both ways.”

(England, small business (10-24 employees), 4 FHRs rating)

Areas for improvement within the current FHRs

The suggested improvements to the FHRs tended to mirror the concerns that business had about the scheme. This included improving the consistency of the scheme, and ensuring that the inspections focused on compliance with food hygiene requirements, rather than having too much emphasis on paperwork. Some businesses also suggested improving the clarity of the scheme for consumers, while some other businesses suggested moving to a more collaborative approach to working between food businesses and regulators. These are discussed in more detail below.

Consistency

While consistency had been more of a concern for large businesses, it was raised as an area for potential improvements across small and large businesses in all three nations. Businesses wanted the scheme to be consistent between nations and local authorities, linking this to ensuring it was seen as fair, and could be used with confidence by consumers. Some suggested introducing mandatory display in England to strengthen the consistency of the scheme.

“Yes, I do think we need to have consistency across the devolved governments if possible.”

(Large retail business)

Paperwork

Some businesses suggested changing the weighting given to completed paperwork in the FHRs ratings given to businesses. As mentioned in Chapter 5, those who raised this felt it could be unfair for a food business complying with food hygiene requirements to be penalised disproportionately for falling behind with paperwork.

Businesses also suggested ideas for addressing concerns around paperwork. One business proposed giving businesses a short time to complete and submit up-to-date paperwork addressing any advisory changes or comments. This would then inform the final FHRs rating, rather than having to apply for a re-assessment on the basis of poor paperwork. They said that other auditors they work with, who consider other areas of the business, use this approach, and it has worked well for them.

“Give them some way of showing or providing evidence that they've rectified [paperwork issues] and reassess the score without a re-visit. Even if it's a 4, not a 5, that's something I'd do.”

(Wales, small business (10-24 employees), 5 FHRs rating)

Other suggestions included digitising paperwork as far as possible. For example, one business suggested an online portal where chefs and other staff could input compliance checks and other information in real time. In their view, this would make it easier for the FSA to check how a business was operating, and for the business themselves to stay on track. Another business suggested having separate ratings for the outcome of the physical food hygiene inspection and the completeness of the associated paperwork.

“If there was a digital system for it, that the chefs could just input the information straight through, I would have thought that would be helpful for everybody.”

(Northern Ireland, small business (10-24 employees), 3 FHRs rating)

Clarity about how the FHRs works

Another theme that emerged was that more could be done to provide further clarity on why businesses had been given a certain rating. This was seen as important in terms of explaining ratings to consumers, but also for businesses themselves. For example, businesses suggested that more information could be added to the display stickers to explain why a business had been awarded a certain rating, and what was involved to achieve that rating. This would allow customers to have a better understanding of how the scheme works, and then make more informed decisions when choosing where to buy food. Alongside this, businesses wanted to see more done to increase awareness and understanding of the FHRs scheme among the public, particularly around ratings and what they mean. One suggestion was that the FHRs scheme needed to be re-launched with the public to clarify how it works.

“I think it could be improved by more awareness of the scheme... and an improvement of the PR basically.”

(England, small business (10-24 employees), 3 FHRs rating)

Working relationship between businesses and regulators

A final area of potential improvement raised by a few small and medium businesses focused on the nature of the relationship between businesses and regulators. They wanted those involved with running the scheme and determining ratings to be more approachable. They argued that businesses generally wanted to operate to the highest levels of compliance, but that doing so in practice can be particularly difficult for small businesses. As such, they wanted a more collaborative approach, with the FSA and local authorities working with businesses to improve

food hygiene standards. For example, this might encourage businesses to ask for help with problems they are facing without concerns that they may be penalised as a result.

“I think people can get so stressed out by it that it's not helpful as they just end up hiding stuff. Whereas if it was more approachable and a less – not stern approach as I think you should be strict on that – but if it was more of a help-you scheme, something like that, then you might actually solve more problems.”

(England, small business (25-49 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

“A lot of the things with the scheme are really good. Maybe another thing as well, but just to break down the barriers of it not being such a scary thing for business owners.”

(Northern Ireland, small business (10-24 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

“Everybody fears an inspection, because you don't want to have things wrong and lose marks. But sometimes, maybe giving advice and guidance can also be a good way of approaching it.”

(England, small business (10-24 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

Linked to this, some businesses wanted the FSA and local authorities to do more to offer updated information to businesses. They said this would help businesses to be more aware of the current regulations and guidance.