

Value of FHRs Local Authority research:

Chapter 6 Reducing inspection frequency for high risk businesses based on compliance

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 Local Authorities (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 the views of LAs about the FHRS. LA representatives were asked for their views on inspections happening less frequently for businesses that have had a sustained level of good compliance over a number of years.

Overall, LA representatives from Wales were strongly opposed to any changes to inspection frequency based on compliance. They felt the inspection frequencies were broadly appropriate, including for compliant high risk businesses.

“It's now three years since some businesses had their last inspection due to COVID, and the fact standards have gone down tells us that the frequencies were just about right previously, in my mind.”

(LA representative from Wales)

However, a few Welsh LA representatives raised the possibility of a more focused or adapted inspection for compliant businesses, which they called a ‘verification’. This adapted inspection would be less thorough but would happen at the same frequency as the current full inspections. This could focus on things that were more relevant to compliant businesses.

“Perhaps it's not about the frequency itself because they're well embedded and they seem to work well. Perhaps...if you've been food hygiene scored at a 5, the type of intervention that you get the next time might be a slightly different one, so it might be a ‘verification’. It would be done at the same frequency but it'll just concentrate on the different aspects of what they're undertaking so it's more worthwhile. Particularly if that's applied to the ones which have already got perhaps a history of good compliance. Then that would be not changing the frequency but actually changing what local authorities and officers do.”

(LA representative from Wales)

In England, views on inspection frequency for high risk businesses were more mixed. In part, this was because LA representatives from England described facing resource constraints and a COVID-19 backlog. In practice, many LAs were already reducing inspection frequency based on compliance. This has meant that some LAs have opted to prioritise businesses that are higher risk, have a lower rating, or both.

While there was some support for reduced frequency based on compliance among LA representatives from England, there were also significant concerns. Those LA representatives who were not supportive, argued that while this might be a good idea in principle, through past experiences, they have found that standards can slip significantly if businesses have not had an inspection for several years.

“We can put an element of trust in them, but this break [COVID] has made that difficult because, yes, there's a lot of what were broadly-compliant businesses that have significantly reduced in standard.”

(LA representative from England)

Others referenced the impact that staff or management changes can have on business compliance with food hygiene standards, emphasising the need for regular inspections. In addition, LA representatives pointed out that COVID-19 had introduced a forced break in their scheduled visits to some businesses, and since returning to inspections they have often seen a significant drop in standards from businesses that were previously highly rated. For this reason, some argued for more frequent visits.

“With the ones which score, consistently, top score, 5, who probably have their own auditors coming in. And you're consistently going and it's always really good. I think they could be reduced, the frequency we inspect those. Sometimes you just go in and it's spotless. But then, it still can change management and then sometimes it goes downhill.”

(LA representative from England)

“I think if you've got the same people running a business and it is consistently good, then yes. We can put an element of trust in them, but this break has made that difficult because, yes, there's a lot of what were broadly-compliant businesses that have significantly reduced in standard.”

(LA representative from England)

The LA representatives from Northern Ireland had reservations about reducing inspection frequency based on compliance for higher risk businesses. However, both LA representatives from Northern Ireland suggested that they felt that the track record of compliance already plays a role in how they prioritise their inspections, including how confident they have in management. One also said that if less frequent inspections were introduced, they would like to see some alternative form of intervention to check in on these businesses, such as self-assessment questionnaires.