

Value of FHRS Consumer Research: Chapter 2 Consumer awareness and use of the current Food Hygiene Rating Scheme

2.1 Spontaneous views and consumer expectations of the FHRS

Familiarity with the FHRS varied considerably amongst consumers. In some cases, participants knew more about the FHRS, often because they relied on checking food safety and hygiene ratings before deciding on where to buy food from. Others had worked in food businesses in the past and were familiar with food safety and hygiene practices, and regular inspections from LAs.

“I’ve worked in accommodation and hospitality, and we’ve had ratings. It’s not only about how dirty or clean your kitchen is, but it’s about the paperwork, how the kitchen is run, etc.”

(Wales, Aware of FHRS)

There were also participants who were less aware of the FHRS, but correctly associated the scheme with the ratings stickers displayed by food businesses. They had little understanding of how the ratings were decided, or what the ratings meant beyond the best and worst scores.

“I don’t know much other than 0 is bad and 5 is good.”

(Northern Ireland, Mixed awareness of FHRS)

Across the discussions, most participants associated the FHRS with food hygiene. There was an expectation that FHRS scores were awarded following an inspection. Participants who were not familiar with the detail of the scheme made assumptions that the ratings would involve checking food hygiene in food businesses. Those who were more familiar with the scheme discussed how inspections covered issues like cleanliness, storage and how kitchens are managed.

“I’ve just heard they go into restaurants and have a look around and see how they prepare their food and the cleanliness and give a rating accordingly.”

(England, Limited awareness of FHRS)

There was some confusion about who was responsible for the scheme and who carried out the inspections. While some participants knew about the role LAs play, others believed the FSA was responsible for the scheme overall and assumed the FSA carried out the inspections directly. In some cases, participants did not know how the scheme is managed. Others thought it was the responsibility of the business.

Participants’ initial discussions about businesses that are part of the FHRS focused on restaurants, cafes, pubs, and takeaways because they prepare and serve food directly to consumers. When probed, participants across all groups and with mixed levels of awareness of the FHRS, expected that the FHRS applies to institutions like schools, care homes and hospitals. However, the scheme was most closely associated with eating out and takeaways.

Participants across groups were also uncertain about whether supermarkets were included in the scheme. In the initial spontaneous discussions, supermarkets and other retailers that sell fresh and chilled foods were often mentioned across groups. Those with a greater awareness of the FHRs were more likely to expect that supermarkets would be included in the scope of the FHRs. However, this was generally mentioned following probing rather than spontaneously. Furthermore, even when participants thought that supermarkets may be included in the FHRs, they generally said that they would not check a supermarket's rating before purchasing from that store. Participants were unsure about whether the FHRs applied if only pre-packed foods were being sold.

“I don't know [about supermarkets], I wouldn't have thought so. I thought it was just for restaurants and places where they are serving food and cooking for the public.”

(England, Limited awareness of FHRs)

Although levels of understanding varied, overall there was a broad awareness of the FHRs among participants. They had seen the ratings displayed by food businesses when eating out or buying takeaways, and generally knew that establishments with good food safety and hygiene practices would be awarded a higher score.

“I'm familiar with what they used to call the scores on the doors. Up to a 5-star rating is considered very hygienic. And lesser the number, the lesser the hygiene rating.”

(England, Limited awareness of FHRs)

2.2 Current use of the FHRs

Reflecting the different levels of familiarity with the FHRs, the extent to which participants used the ratings in their decision-making as consumers also varied. There were participants who said that they relied on the scheme to choose where to buy food, particularly for eating out or takeaways. As might be expected, those who used the scheme tended to be those who were more concerned about food safety and hygiene and the risks of becoming ill.

“I know about it. If it's a low rating I won't go in. I'll only go if it's 4 or 5.”

(Wales, Limited awareness of FHRs)

“I wouldn't eat anywhere less than a 4. Or order from anywhere less than a 4.”

(England, Aware of FHRs)

On the other hand, many participants said that FHRs ratings made 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. They described other considerations as being more important in shaping their behaviour. In some cases, participants said that they would simply ignore the current FHRs rating if they had a favourable opinion of the business and had enjoyed their food in the past and not had any problems. Others explained that they had limited choice locally if they wanted to buy a particular type of food, particularly from a takeaway. For them, being able to buy the type of food they wanted was more important than the FHRs rating.

“There are two Chinese takeaways in Ballycastle, and one has a score of 1 and the other I'm not sure. But the one with a score of 1 is the nicest one and it wouldn't stop me going.”

(Northern Ireland, Aware of FHRs)

“In my area there are loads of chicken and chips shops. I don't actually look at the score I just know which chip shop I like, so I just go there. I felt fine after eating but I just didn't look.”

(England, Aware of FHRs)

2.3 Perceived Value of the FHRS for consumers

Participants were most familiar with FHRS ratings through the stickers displayed by food businesses. For many, the scheme was important because it offered them trustworthy, independent information about the food hygiene standards of businesses. Participants who were concerned about these issues often said that they checked ratings. They saw this as a way for them to reduce the risks of buying food, particularly from restaurants and takeaways, by avoiding lower rated businesses, and clearly valued the consumer-facing aspect of the FHRS.

However, participants also considered other factors when deciding whether to buy food from a business. In some cases, and particularly among participants in England, familiarity seemed to be more important than the rating received. They felt that unless they had problems, they would continue to use food businesses even if they had lower ratings. They often said they did not know what the ratings were for takeaways and restaurants they used regularly.

“I didn't check it. It's only when these things are brought up to you, you start thinking about it.”

(England, Limited awareness of FHRS)

In general, participants in Northern Ireland and Wales were more likely to be aware of the FHRS and the role of the FSA. However, some participants who were aware of, and who valued the scheme, explained that a poor rating would not prevent them from using a business.

“I trust them [the inspectors] because there is no reason not to. I don't know how much that trust is worth because it doesn't always stop me from eating at a 1-star. But I say there is no reason not to trust them.”

(Wales, Aware of FHRS)

“It's indicative of the quality if the place has a 5, but you judge it more by the look of it when you walk in. It might have a 4 or 5 and still look manky. And will affect your judgement more than the number.”

(Northern Ireland, Aware of FHRS)

Participants in all three countries also discussed how the FHRS rating becomes more important to them if they are visiting somewhere that is unfamiliar and choosing where to eat or order takeaway. Not knowing about the local businesses meant that they were more willing to use the FHRS rating to differentiate, particularly between similar businesses.

“If you're in a new place and you're looking for a restaurant, you may look at a few, look at the menus, and think there's something you're interested in. If you've got one that's a 5 and one that's a 3, you'll be more inclined to lean towards the 5.”

(England, Aware of FHRS)

“If I were going somewhere out of town, I would probably check it out, if I were going somewhere I was not familiar with.”

(Northern Ireland, Limited awareness of FHRS)

Participants also valued the general reassurance that food safety and hygiene were being reviewed in food businesses. This was grounded in their assumption that inspections were happening regularly – with expectations ranging from a few times a year to every two years – and that these inspections were independent and applied consistent rules across businesses. This is discussed further in Chapter 3.

A few participants said they had seen ratings based on inspections that happened several years before. They felt these ratings might not reflect current food safety practices, and for some, this called into question how useful the ratings were.

“I think I noticed that one place I went to, it had a 5 rating, but it was from 2019. It makes you wonder how they inspect these things because a lot could change in 2 or 3 years.”
(England, Aware of FHRS)

Other participants also mentioned the value of FHRS scores when ordering food online from unfamiliar businesses. Without being able to visit the business themselves to make their own assessment of whether it was likely to be safe to purchase food from that business, FHRS ratings being included on online platforms was seen as important.

“A lot of takeaways you can go in and hopefully the kitchens you can actually see. If you’re ordering online and they don’t have a certificate or anything you just don’t know what their facilities are like.”
(England, Aware of FHRS)

2.4 Consumer awareness and expectations of businesses included in the FHRS

Participants were shown several examples of businesses and asked which they thought were currently part of the FHRS. They were later asked which businesses they thought should be part of the scheme.

Participants generally agreed that if a business sells, handles, or prepares food, they would expect them to be part of the scheme. This included restaurants, cafes, takeaways, and food retailers. Businesses that prepare fresh food were considered particularly important to include, as were those providing meals to vulnerable people, such as in schools, hospitals, or care homes. While many participants thought that all businesses handling any kind of fresh or chilled food should be included in the scheme, there was more debate about businesses they considered very low risk.

Some participants argued that businesses that only sold pre-packaged food that did not require chilling, did not necessarily need to be part of the scheme. The example shown to them during the discussion that tended to prompt this debate was a chemist selling sweets. Many participants did not think that these businesses needed to be included in the scheme.

“I don’t know if a chemist selling sweets would because it’s low risk, and they’re not preparing sweets. It’s not food preparation you see in other examples.”
(Wales, Aware of FHRS)

Participants perceived businesses that only sell pre-packed foods as low risk and felt that this was a good example of a business that could be outside of the scope of the FHRS. In some cases, this was extended to include other retailers selling snacks or sweets, and pubs that did not serve fresh meals. However, the simplicity of having all food businesses included in the scheme remained an important feature of the scheme, even after considering those dealing with lower risk food.

Some participants across all three nations also discussed food manufacturing businesses, on the basis that they assumed they were part of the scheme. This seemed to be linked to the large-scale operations associated with these business and the need for stringent regulations because of the associated risks to large numbers of consumers.

2.5 Consumer attitudes to mandatory display of ratings

Across the discussions, there was mixed awareness of whether FHRS ratings had to be displayed by a business. In Wales and Northern Ireland, participants generally assumed that

ratings had to be displayed, and a few mentioned that this was now a legal requirement. However, participants in all three nations were generally not aware that scores are voluntary to display in England.

The idea that displaying ratings was voluntary in England was surprising and often very concerning for participants in England. They felt that the voluntary display of ratings limited the 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 were a few examples of businesses that had a lower rating, but this had not been known until stories appeared in the local press or via social media. Participants felt that consumers may be at risk from eating food from food businesses with a low rating without being aware that they were not complying with standards as well as they should be.

“I don’t get why they’d go through all that and it’s somewhere that could potentially harm someone with food poisoning and they’re legally not obliged to display that in their premises. I find that quite shocking.”

(England, Aware of FHRS)

Linked to this, businesses in England that chose to display their rating were seen to be taking the scheme seriously and demonstrating their commitment to good practices.

“Especially as it’s voluntary in England, it gives an indication if they have their rating up that they’re also taking it seriously as well. And they’re concerned to have good practices and have proven that they have.”

(England, Aware of FHRS)

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 lots of reasons, including food safety, transparency, and fairness between people living in different places.