

Value of FHRs Local Authority research: Executive summary

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Area of research interest: [Research projects](#)

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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 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.

Methodology and sampling

The research with LAs involved a series of four online workshops – three with LA representatives from England, and one with representatives from Wales. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with LA representatives from Northern Ireland. The workshops lasted 2 hours and the in-depth interviews were 60 minutes.

Across the workshops and interviews, 50 participants took part in the research – 33 representatives from LAs in England, 15 representatives from LAs in Wales, and 2 representatives from LAs in Northern Ireland.

Discussions included LA representatives' views of the current FHRS and how it works in practice and their perceptions of the value of the FHRS. LAs were also asked about their views on inspection frequency, re-assessments at the request of food businesses, and the role of remote inspections. Finally, LAs discussed how the FHRS could be improved.

Key findings

The value of the FHRS

LA representatives from across all three nations were positive about the current FHRS. They said the scheme had helped encourage increased consistency for regulating food hygiene standards in food businesses across all three nations. While LA representatives from Wales were broadly content with the scheme, those from LAs in England felt the scheme could benefit from a review to ensure it kept up with changes in the new types of businesses since the FHRS was introduced.

LAs representatives across England and Wales agreed that consistency around how food hygiene standards are assessed was a crucial feature of the FHRs, and fundamental to the value of the scheme. LA representatives from Wales and Northern Ireland believed the FHRs has brought consistency to how food hygiene standards are regulated in food businesses. Although they agreed that consistency has improved through the FHRs, LA representatives from England highlighted differences in how the scheme is managed in different places, particularly in terms of how low risk businesses are regulated.

LA representatives across all three nations explained that another fundamental value of the scheme was providing consistent information about food hygiene standards to the public, supporting consumer confidence and choice. However, some LA representatives in England questioned how much consumers use FHRs ratings in practice.

LA representatives from England and Wales also pointed out the value of the scheme for environmental health teams within LAs. The high profile, public nature of the scheme meant that it had raised the profile of food hygiene standards, generating interest and engagement from elected members and local media. This was seen as having strengthened the role of environmental health teams.

Managing re-assessment at the request of businesses

LA representatives described challenges associated with re-assessments and revisits, although the extent of this varied. The challenges mentioned were:

- the role of online aggregators (like Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats) as a driver for re-assessments;
- businesses requesting a quicker re-assessment process due to there being a fee
- businesses who have a lower FHRs rating looking to avoid re-assessment charges by re-registering as a new business.
- some LA representatives in England also discussed whether lower risk retailers needed to be included in the scheme, particularly where only pre-packed ambient food was being sold. This view was not shared by all LA representatives in England, but those who discussed it were generally open to these types of businesses being exempt from the scheme.

What businesses do LAs value being in the FHRs?

Overall, LAs did not highlight specific types of business that they particularly valued being in the scheme. Instead, they emphasised the importance of a consistent approach to assessing food hygiene standards in food businesses like takeaways, restaurants, cafes, and institutions (for example, schools, hospitals and care homes).

Views on voluntary and mandatory display

In Wales, mandatory display was strongly supported and seen as fundamental to the effectiveness of the FHRs. LA representatives in Wales thought mandatory display highlighted the importance of their work and had helped raise food hygiene standards. They also felt that mandatory display brought benefits for consumers by increasing transparency.

LA representatives in Northern Ireland also strongly supported mandatory display. They explained that a voluntary scheme was not fair because businesses would not display their rating if it was

not in their interest to do so.

In England, there was strong support for introducing mandatory display for FHRs ratings. LA representatives in England felt that voluntary display undermined the value of the FHRs by reducing the incentives for businesses to comply. They believed mandatory display would further encourage compliance with food hygiene standards. However, they voiced concern about the existing pressure on resourcing the work associated with the FHRs, and worried about some of the practicalities of enforcing mandatory display. For example, concerns were raised that this could lead to increased aggression towards inspectors or others responsible for ensuring low-rated businesses display the correct stickers.

Reducing inspection frequency for high risk businesses based on compliance

LA representatives in 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. However, some discussed the possibility of a more focused or adapted inspection regime for compliant businesses, involving a less thorough inspection, at the same regularity as current inspections; they referred to this as a 'verification'.

In England, views on inspection frequency for high risk businesses were more mixed. In part, this was because LA representatives in England described facing resource constraints and a COVID-19 backlog; many LAs were already reducing the frequency of inspection based on compliance levels and prioritising businesses deemed as higher risk. Those who had concerns about reduced inspection frequency described previous experiences of standards falling significantly when businesses were not inspected for several years. The impact of staff and management changes on compliance levels was also a concern, with LAs emphasising the need for regular inspections.

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 are in a business' management.

Aspects of the scheme that could be improved

LA representatives from Wales were unanimous in their support for the existing scheme, which they considered effective and consistent across Wales. They had few suggestions for areas of improvement.

LA representatives from England were more likely than those in Wales to suggest improvements to the current scheme. Their priorities included addressing issues such as introducing mandatory display and reviewing the types of low risk businesses included in the scheme. Changing the range of awarded ratings was also an area of improvement highlighted by several LA representatives from England. They felt that the current 0-5 ratings were potentially confusing for consumers and were not well understood. Different options were discussed but no consensus was reached.

LA representatives from England and Northern Ireland suggested changing the confidence in management part of the rating. A number of LA representatives from both nations suggested that the lack of flexibility around rating confidence in management meant that they could not always give a fair assessment of the business.

LA representatives from Northern Ireland felt that there was room for some changes and improvements within the current system. They felt the 0 to 5 ratings generally worked well, but that the 3 rating was perhaps too broad and could be changed.