

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme Online Display in Wales: Introduction

1.1 Background

The Food Standards Agency (FSA)'s Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) provides information about the hygiene standards of businesses which sell food directly to consumers (such as restaurants, takeaways, pubs, hotels, supermarkets, newsagents, etc.). By empowering consumers to make informed choices about where they eat and purchase food by selecting those businesses with a higher rating, FHRS encourages behaviour change, driving up business compliance, and reducing foodborne illness.

The FSA know that consumers are increasingly purchasing food online and, as such, may not have immediate access to information on a food business' rating when online. The FSA recognises the continued success and credibility of FHRS is dependent on it meeting consumer demands and expectations. As a result, it was hypothesised that providing food hygiene ratings information on food businesses own websites will enhance consumer accessibility.

The FSA commissioned this research to better understand the potential consumer benefit of mandating online display of FHRS ratings by businesses in Wales.

1.2 Objectives

The research needed to:

1. Explore consumer expectations around online display of FHRS ratings information and build an understanding about consumer context in this area
2. Inform development of best practice in the presentation of ratings information

1.3 Research questions

Specifically, it needed to answer:

1. How and where should the ratings information be signposted to maximise customer awareness and use?
2. What are the best means of presenting the ratings so that consumers can easily access meaningful information that empowers them to make informed choices?
3. What drives consumer reactions and preferences?
4. How high is the risk of misunderstandings or other barriers arising?
5. What strategies might help to prevent confusion and maximise accessibility?

1.4 Methodology

In order to address the research questions, 2CV and Community Research conducted three focus groups (6-8 participants in each) with members of the public to explore the potential benefits of online FHRS display. The groups were preceded by an online digital task. The considerations

informing the methodological approach were as follows:

1. **Better understanding of the context:** Exploration of consumer needs and priorities in the context of how decisions are made when selecting a food business could have resulted in some post rationalising (including what they felt they ought to consider). It was believed a digital task, designed to replicate the online experience, would more likely deliver an understanding of current behaviours and any unmet needs.
2. **Avoiding over examination of the issues:** Selection and evaluation of information to help people make decisions on where and what to eat is something done 'in the moment' and relatively quickly. The criteria used are often not given too much thought. Standard 90 minute group discussions afforded enough time to discuss experiences and needs and to work collaboratively on ideas to optimise the FHRS online proposition.
3. **The impact of environment:** It was believed critical to understand the impact of environment. An urban / suburban experience, with extensive food choices could prompt different needs to those in a rural setting, where choices are more limited. As such, the research was designed to include a range of environments, whilst also covering two distinct regions of Wales.

As noted above, participants were tasked with completing (and creating a screen recording of) two online 'journeys' before attending the groups in order to prompt accurate recall and to better understand 'in-moment' purchasing considerations when (a) ordering a takeaway from somewhere new and (b) researching restaurants before a special occasion meal. The group sessions covered the following:

- Exploration of: consumer experiences of, and attitudes to, using information to make decisions; exploration of any unmet needs;
- Understand consumer responses to the provision of FHRS data online and what drives these responses
- Identify how best to maximise effectiveness of an online FHRS system.

For the objectives of this study researchers used a process called iterative thematic analysis, where key themes are drawn out through a process of experiences, discussions and exploration of data.

1.5 Sample

Focus groups were held in Cardiff (x2) and Wrexham (x1) with a mix of rural, suburban and urban residents. All groups were recruited to include a spread of social grade and an even mix of gender. The two Cardiff groups were split by age, with one older (aged 40+) and one younger (18-39), whilst participants in the Wrexham group were recruited to have a spread of ages. Due to the restricted number of groups, Socio Economic Group (social class based on income and occupation of the head of household) was left to fall out, rather than by quota.

Respondents were recruited using a qualitative recruitment screener that ensured they met all of the necessary key participant criteria, namely:

- Awareness of the FHRS scheme
- To have ordered food online (takeaway) in the last 12 months