

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme Online Display in Wales: The role of food hygiene in decision-making

2.1 Hygiene and cleanliness sit amongst a wide range of factors consumers value when making choices about food

Consumers seek out various types of information when choosing places from which to purchase food (whether as a takeaway, sit down meal, etc.). Participants told us about a wide range of factors including:

- **More functional factors** such as location, budget, menu options, parking provisions, child-friendly, ease of parking/travel, caters to dietary requirements
- **More emotional, subjective factors** such as taste/flavour of food, ambience, brand equity,

The priority of importance of these factors is highly dependent on the individual and the specific occasion, such as who else they are eating with, their mood or their personal tastes. However, hygiene and cleanliness are almost always factored into the overall decision-making process to some degree.

2.2 Hygiene is particularly difficult to source information about online

While consumers may feel that some factors are particularly important in their decision-making process, this does not always translate into ability to easily access information about that factor. For example, things like menu options, budget or location tend to be very easy to gather information about online, usually via a search engine or an FBO's own website.

Information about how the food will taste or the 'quality' or provenance of ingredients, for example, can be more difficult to unearth. Similarly, participants told us that hygiene and cleanliness feel particularly difficult to find information about online.

2.3 Currently consumers often use proxies to help determine hygiene and cleanliness

In order to resolve this tension, people often use proxies to determine hygiene and cleanliness. On a FBO's physical premises, consumers may use factors like the look and feel of a restaurant, a 'sense' of a clean kitchen (particularly where premises has an 'open' kitchen), the quality of customer service and an inspection of the food on offer (alongside knowledge of a hygiene rating) to help them decide whether the business is hygienic or not. Online, consumers have fewer options, but may use customer reviews and photos shared by either other customers or FBOs themselves to help determine hygiene and cleanliness.

“Sometimes I call them up so I can hear their voice... You can get a sense from speaking to someone about whether it’s the kind of place you’d want to eat at” – Cardiff

2.4 ‘Higher end’ establishments have an expectation of cleanliness and quality, whereas food hygiene is more of a concern for takeaways

For high-end establishments, food hygiene tends to be taken for granted and is more of an expectation. Conversely, hygiene is more top of mind for fast food, takeaway and casual dining establishments. Using online channels raises consumer concerns even more due to:

1. The fact that consumers cannot use cleanliness cues ‘in store’ as a shorthand for food hygiene and
2. Recent media coverage of business practices of online food businesses i.e. “dark kitchens”, lack of quality control by aggregators

“[when you’re online] you can’t see the rating on the door” – Wrexham

“There was something in the news today – basically that they had just got some kitchen things set up in car park portacabins and they were making it there.... It was sort of skirting round hygiene stuff and environmental hygiene.... So that’s in the back of my mind” – Cardiff