

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme Online Display in Wales: The online Food Business Operator landscape

3.1 Online is increasingly the main channel for discovery and the first touchpoint consumers have with Food Business Operators (FBO)

Whether looking for somewhere new to order a takeaway from or researching restaurants for an occasion meal out, many journeys now start online. Participants told us that when they're seeking out a new place to eat, they would normally either go straight to Google or JustEat, the latter particularly true for takeaways or home delivery.

However, journeys don't always stay purely online or purely offline. Even when a research process has begun online, consumers will often use a variety of channels during the process. These may include reading customer reviews (online), asking family or friends for recommendations (online, face-to-face, on the phone), making enquiries with an FBO (online, face-to-face, on the phone), reading FBO websites for additional information like location, price or menu choices (online).

3.2 Younger consumers are increasingly making use of aggregators, and taking a more 'flirtatious' approach to FBO choice

While many consumers still tend to stick to what they know, and rarely try out new food establishments, there may be a cultural shift emerging with younger consumers more likely to make use of online aggregators and to say they experiment more with different FBOs.

[Younger] “Nowadays I feel like I’m always trying something new” - Cardiff

[Older] “When you order from home you tend to always use the same places don’t you” - Cardiff

3.3 Consumers don't feel that different rules for online and offline make sense

Consumers are already using a mixture of online and offline channels when it comes to researching and interacting with FBOs. To them these don't feel like different universes and therefore drawing a distinction between the two channels for FHRS display is described as inconsistent.

“Why shouldn't they have to show them online?” - Wrexham

[Older] “Why should they be allowed to hide them online if they have to show them in the restaurant?” - Cardiff

3.4 Customer reviews are simultaneously relied upon and unreliable

Customer reviews are particularly heavily relied upon. Almost all participants we spoke to were using JustEat, Google and TripAdvisor to access customer reviews. These channels are often the only way to assess certain elements of an FBO from the quality and taste of the food, to customer service, to cleanliness and hygiene. People also use reviews in different ways. Some only read negative reviews whereas for others the number of reviews is key.

[Younger] “I just go on the review. I look for other people’s experiences” – Cardiff

“I’m sort of comforted by the fact that people have reviewed it” – Wrexham

At the same time, customer reviews are thought difficult to rely on. It’s difficult to verify their authenticity. It is felt that both positive and negative reviews could be falsified or be the result of a ‘bad day’, one-off mistakes, or different tastes. Some participants feel reviews also say a lot without saying that much. For example, it can be unclear whether the reviewer liked or disliked the menu, the food, the customer service, the atmosphere, the delivery times, or any other factor.

[Younger] “I think you can’t go on the review too much - different people have different tastes” – Cardiff

[Older] “You could be a family friend of that restaurant and you could go on there and do a really good review” – Cardiff

[Younger] “But people who have eaten it can’t tell me if it’s come from a safe place” – Cardiff

3.5 There is a gap for a more reliable, consistent source of information about hygiene

As described above, the current information landscape is piecemeal. Consumers tend to develop strategies for navigating it by using various, disparate pieces of information to make quick, off-the-cuff choices about food.

Consumers are able to navigate the current information available to them despite its random state and aren’t actively complaining about gaps. However, if given the opportunity, they would rather it be more reliable and standardised. There is therefore a gap for credible, reliable information to help consumers make evidence-based, safe choices about food.

3.6 Online display of FHRs would be welcomed as a reliable source of hygiene information

FHRs ratings are well recognised and already well used on FBOs’ physical premises. Although awareness of the FSA is mixed and consumers understanding of what the ratings represent are varied, they are seen to provide a useful at-a-glance guide to help inform their decision making.

However, most understand the ratings to come from an “official” inspector. As such, FHRs is understood to come from a reliable and independent party – a welcomed change to the current milieu of inconsistent and unreliable information. Prominent FHRs ratings would appeal as a pillar of consistency and trust in a hard to navigate sea of information.