

Minutes of the meeting of the Welsh Food Advisory Committee held on 15 July 2021 via Teams

Via Teams

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE WELSH FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE HELD ON 15 JULY 2021 VIA TEAMS

Present:

Welsh Food Advisory Committee (WFAC) Members Attending:

Peter Price, Chair
Alan Gardner
Dr Philip Hollington
Christopher Brereton OBE
Helen Taylor
Georgia Taylor
Dr John Williams

Food Standards Agency (FSA) Officials Attending:

Nathan Barnhouse – Director, FSA in Wales
Julie Pierce – Director Wales, Information and Science
Helen George – Head of Business Services and Communications Wales
Lucy Boruk – Business Manager
Kerys James-Palmer- Head of Regulatory Policy
Owen Lewis- Head of Regulatory Policy and Local Authority Partnerships
Sarah Aza- Head of Local Authority Delivery

Guest Speakers:

Jayne Griffiths- Local Authority Partnership Officer, FSA
Helen Graham- Senior Data Scientist, FSA
Neel Savani-Patel- Cognizant Lead Data Scientist

Observers:

Caroline Kitson- Senior Communications Manager, FSA

1. Introductions

1.1 The Chair welcomed all attendees to the meeting.

2. Declaration of interests

2.1 No new declarations of interest were noted since the last meeting on 20 June 2021.

3. Chair's Update (Paper FSA 21/07/01)

3.1 The Chair provided an update on the last policy meeting that was held on 16 June and the seven papers considered. An update on the Audit and Risk Assessment Committee (ARAC) meeting that took place on 9 June was also provided.

3.2 An update on Mollusc Harvesting in the Menai was provided to the Committee along with an update on the introductory meeting with Lynne Neagle MS, the newly appointed Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing that took place on 23 June.

4. Director's Update (Paper FSA 21/06/02)

4.1 The Director presented his written report which summarised the key activities of the FSA in Wales since the last meeting on 20 June 2021.

4.2 In an oral update, the Director reported that the introductory meeting with Lynne Neagle MS, the newly appointed Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing provided the opportunity to formally introduce the FSA, and to discuss EU exit, COVID-19 recovery and the review of the FSA in Wales. It was a positive meeting and a follow up is currently in preparation.

4.3 In updating the Committee it was noted that the Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Well Being recently announced that a review of the operation of the FSA in Wales is to be undertaken. Welsh Government officials have been asked to develop a specification for this review and appoint an independent team. Over the next few months the FSA in Wales, together with Senior Management across the FSA, will be working with Welsh Government officials to support the review.

4.4 In updating the Committee on discussions being held within the Safe Sustainable Authentic Food Wales (SSAFW) it was noted that the group held its last meeting on 23 June. Matthew Frankcom (Conwy County Borough Council) has stepped down as Chair. The process to elect a new Chair has commenced and an official from Welsh Government will oversee the nomination process. The next meeting is in September. The next meeting of the recovery sub group of SSAFW is being arranged for mid-July when discussions will be held on replacing the recovery sub group with a roadmap review group.

4.5 The Director provided an update on shellfish beds in the Menai area. It was noted the FSA continue to liaise with Welsh Government officials on the water quality issue and any implications this have on the classification of beds.

5. Overview of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS)

5.1 A series of presentations were delivered on the FHRS in Wales, including an overview of FHRS, the digital world, statistics and the impact of COVID-19 on the FHRS.

5.2 Jayne Griffiths delivered a presentation that provided background on the origins of the FHRS scheme in Wales and its purpose. Members noted further positive developments and extensions to the statutory scheme in Wales which have:

- brought business to business trade (e.g. manufacturers) within scope of the Scheme, so enabling food businesses buying from or supplying other food businesses to use and benefit from ratings information; and
- required a bilingual statement, directing consumers to the ratings webpage, be included on certain hardcopy takeaway materials, so delivering improved consumer access to ratings information.

5.3 Details of how LAs operate the scheme in Wales were provided, outlining the risk-based programme of inspection, from which a rating is derived drawing on three elements which focus on the businesses' compliance with food hygiene regulations. Including:

- the level of compliance with food hygiene and safety procedures,
- structural requirements, and
- the confidence in management/control procedures (it was also noted that all the information is open data and available for re-use).

6. Ongoing Developments

6.1 A presentation delivered by Jayne Griffiths covered safeguarding for businesses and the FSA's statutory functions. It was noted the safeguards are:

- the right to appeal their food hygiene rating if they consider it unjust;
- the right to reply; and
- the ability to request a re-rating inspection if improvements have been made to the hygiene standards.

6.2 In terms of the FSA's statutory functions, members noted that legislation places a duty on the FSA to evaluate the implementation and operation of the Scheme every three years and to review the operation of the appeals system annually. The review reports are laid before the Senedd and a copy is sent to Welsh Ministers. These reports make recommendations about the ongoing implementation and development of the FHRS in Wales. The FSA carries out and/or monitors actions and progress against the recommendations as part of its day-to-day operation of the scheme.

6.3 Information was provided on possible future development of the FHRS scheme in Wales arising from recommendations provided in the respective reports. WFAC members welcomed work underway to explore the possibility of extending the scope of the scheme to include childminders and were also interested in hearing about work underway in the FSA about the display of ratings information online.

6.4 Members noted there was consumer, industry and local authority acceptance of the need for ratings information online and support for FSA taking this work forward. Recent work has identified wider interdependencies with other FSA programmes e.g. Register a Food Business and Achieving Business Compliance programmes.

7. The Digital World

7.1 A presentation by Helen Graham and Neel Savani-Patel provided information on some of the innovative functions being investigated to support the possibility of on-line digital display. Information was shared on the proposals to build a tool that monitors online display and uses artificial intelligence to help predict a business's compliance/FHRS score. It was noted that any new digital solution could have the potential to improve the inspections process for Wales, Northern Ireland and England in the future. Any new solution would not replace the need for an environmental health officer but could add value and support their work. The WFAC was supportive of the FSA's work in this area.

8. What are the statistics telling us?

8.1 Information was provided on data being supplied by LAS in Wales in relation to the FHRS. WFAC members noted that:

- the Scheme in Wales continues to have a positive impact, with food businesses achieving

broad compliance rising: 87% in 2013, 95% in 2017 and 97% in July 2021;

- the number of businesses achieving 5 has also increased: 45% in 2013, 65% in 2017 and over 70% today;
- 89% of businesses are displaying their rating – that's an increase over previous years (87% in 2019 & 84% in 2018);
- 38% of businesses are reporting display has a positive impact – a 7% increase from the previous year;
- there's a continuing increased recognition of the Scheme in Wales with 94% of those surveyed recognising the rating stickers (an increase from 89% in 2016);
- a good hygiene rating was – for 71% of the respondents to a consumer survey – the most important factor influencing decisions about where to eat out and
- younger people between the ages of 16 and 44 are more likely to mention the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme.

9. Impact of COVID-19 on FHRs

9.1 The final presentation provided information on the intelligence received about the impact COVID-19 has had on FHRs in Wales. The WFAC noted that LAs in Wales undertook a significant amount of additional work to protect communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 20 April 2020, the FSA had issued guidance to LAs regarding deviations from the Food Law Code of Practice, to assist decisions on the prioritisation of public health protection activities during the pandemic but the deviation guidance had ended on 30 June 2021 and that LAs were now working towards the milestones indicated in the recovery roadmap in Wales.

9.2 The Committee made the following observations about the FHRs scheme:

- It would be useful to explore at UK level the possibility of indicating previous business ratings to provide consumers with trend information, enabling consumers to make an informed decision by reviewing consistency. In response to this suggestion, it was noted that the FSA is exploring options for providing additional information to consumers.
- The potential for fraudulent use of the online badges concerned members. It was noted this would be considered during the development phase of the digital badges.
- The WFAC enquired about the possibility of mandating the need to act against the fraudulent use of the online badge in legislation.
- The scope to work with aggregators on the display of ratings was raised.
- The complexities around the use of artificial intelligence/ online display in relation to retailers without fixed premises was raised.
- Problems around social media platforms and the FHRs were highlighted.
- The recognition of unintentional bias in the application of artificial intelligence and the importance of this when considering socio-economic data was considered positive. It was noted that ethical evaluations have been undertaken to take this into account.
- Consistency of inspections by EHOs was raised. In response, it was noted the FSA has developed guidance to support officers, offers training at a regional, all-Wales and national level, and has a steering group to encourage cross-LA discussion and to facilitate consistency.
- In noting that consumer recognition of the FHRs in Wales was high at 94%, the members enquired about the possibility of also collecting data on consumer understanding of the scheme. The WFAC noted the consumer survey collected limited information on consumers understanding but could offer the opportunity for further exploration.

9.3 Country specific matters raised during discussions included:

- The cost of the local authority recovery model in Wales and the need for sustainable funding to ensure delivery was raised. It was confirmed that discussions would continue with local authorities and with Welsh Government.
- The importance of continued consumer research, including research in Wales and stakeholder engagement, to inform the development of the programme was identified.

- The importance of a continued collaborative approach, with the FSA working in consultation with other Government Departments, local authorities and other key stakeholders, was reinforced.
- The practical issues for local authorities in enforcing the mandatory display of FHRS certificates was also discussed.
- The suggestion of a bilingual badge in both Welsh and English was raised.

10. AOB

10.1 Members noted that the next themed meeting was to be held on 21 October 2021.