Value of FHRS Business Research: Executive summary

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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 businesses about the FHRS.

Methodology and sampling

- the research involved a series of depth interviews with food businesses from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This included small, medium and large business, and business of different types
- across the interviews, 56 participants took part in the research – 20 businesses from England, 14 businesses from Wales, 12 businesses from Northern Ireland, and 10 large businesses operating across all three nations. 40 small businesses, 6 medium businesses, and 10 large businesses took part in the research.
- discussions included businesses' views of the current FHRS, how it works in practice from their perspective, and their perceptions of the value of the FHRS. Businesses were also asked about their views on inspection frequency, mandatory display, and whether the FHRS was fair or unfair. Finally, businesses discussed how the FHRS could be improved.

Key findings

The value of the FHRS

Many businesses across all three nations were positive about the value of FHRS. However, a small number of businesses felt that the FHRS offered limited or no value to their business. The main areas of value businesses associated with the FHRS were around supporting compliance and customer engagement:

Businesses of all sizes discussed the value of the FHRS for understanding how their business was performing in terms of food safety and hygiene compliance. Having an independent assessment from a third party was seen as valuable for ensuring that they were complying with hygiene standards.

Many businesses described the FHRS as important for customer engagement, emphasising the role of the FHRS rating in attracting and retaining customers. However, other businesses thought there was less value around customer engagement because in their experience consumers did not pay attention to FHRS ratings. In particular, some businesses in rural locations said that because of a lack of alternatives, customers would buy food from them regardless of their rating. Large businesses also saw less value for them around customer engagement, suggesting that customers did not seem to consider FHRS ratings before buying food from them.

There were other examples of value from the FHRS, but these were less common. For example, some businesses discussed the role of the FHRS in enabling them to trade through online aggregators (for example, Just Eat, Deliveroo and Uber Eats), and others mentioned the role played by their FHRS rating when applying for insurance policies.

How do businesses view the frequency of FHRS assessment?

Overall, businesses wanted to see FHRS assessments happening at least as frequently as they currently do. In Wales, small businesses generally said they would like to receive inspections annually, and Northern Ireland followed a similar pattern, with most favouring inspections every 12-18 months.

In England, recent experiences of delays between inspections appeared to shape expectations for future inspection frequency. Even so, businesses in England tended to favour inspections at least every two years.

Businesses could generally see benefits to reduced inspection frequency based on compliance. They generally felt that compliant businesses were unlikely to change their practices as a result of less frequent inspections. Some also suggested it could help focus resources on less compliant businesses. However, businesses also discussed that changes in management or high staff turnover should result in an inspection, rather than relying on previous evidence of compliance.

Despite supporting reduced frequency based on compliance overall, a small number of businesses in all three nations had concerns about reduced inspection frequency for high risk businesses specifically. They felt there was a reason these businesses were considered higher risk, and this should be reflected in how often they are assessed as part of the FHRS.

How do businesses view the mandatory display of FHRS ratings?

Businesses generally supported mandatory display of FHRS ratings. Across all three nations, businesses thought mandatory display helped to improve customer confidence and encouraged compliance with food hygiene standards. However, there were some concerns around fairness, as described below.

In Wales and Northern Ireland businesses wanted mandatory display to continue. In England, where the display of FHRS ratings is currently voluntary, most businesses felt that mandatory display should be introduced.

Support for mandatory display was consistent across businesses of different sizes. Many large businesses already asked their premises to display FHRS ratings in England, where display is voluntary.

Do businesses view the current scheme as fair?

Overall, businesses described the FHRS as fair. They linked this to the standardised nature of the scheme and clarity about what was needed to achieve a high rating. However, they highlighted some concerns around the consistency of the scheme, unannounced inspections and administrative burden.

A lack of consistency was a common concern among large businesses. They cited ratings they felt did not reflect the practice in a specific premises. While small businesses were mostly positive about consistency, a few shared similar concerns, focusing on differences between individual inspectors.

Some businesses felt unannounced inspections made the FHRS fair because this approach meant that businesses could not prepare and that inspections therefore reflected normal practice. However, some small businesses felt unannounced inspections were unfair as businesses might be caught on a ‘bad day’ and have that rating for a long time.

Concerns were raised about the administrative burden associated with the FHRS for small businesses with limited resources. Many of the businesses who raised this issue had themselves received higher ratings.

What improvements do businesses suggest to the scheme?

Most businesses described the current scheme as working well, and often struggled to suggest specific improvements. This was particularly the case for small businesses. Instead, suggested improvements tended to focus on small amendments to make the scheme more effective in achieving its objectives.

These suggested improvements to the FHRS tended to mirror the concerns that businesses had about the scheme. They included improving the consistency of the scheme, and ensuring that the inspections focused on compliance with food hygiene requirements, rather than having too much emphasis on paperwork. Some businesses also suggested improving the clarity of the scheme for consumers, while some other businesses suggested moving towards a more collaborative approach to maintaining food hygiene standards, with food businesses and regulators working together.