

Value of FHRs Business Research: Chapter 3

How do businesses view the frequency of FHRs assessment?

Businesses were asked for their overall views on FHRs inspections, including their preferences around inspection frequency. It is important to note that many businesses referenced the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic when discussing inspection frequency. There was some confusion about whether the length of time since their previous inspection was because of the pandemic, or whether the timing reflected how the scheme had operated previously.

Reflecting the pandemic context and the range of businesses included in the sample, recent experiences of inspection frequency varied considerably. Some businesses said they were inspected once or twice a year, while others said it had been as long as five years since their most recent inspection.

3.1 Preferences for frequency of inspections

Across all three nations, businesses typically wanted to have inspections at least as often, or more frequently, compared to their current situation. In Wales, small and medium 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, small and medium businesses were more likely to say that it had been more than two years since their previous inspection, than businesses in Wales or Northern Ireland, linking this to the COVID-19 pandemic. This appeared to shape their expectations for how often inspections would happen in future. Even so, businesses in England tended to favour inspections at least every two years.

In contrast, a few of the smallest businesses said they would not want more frequent inspections, and that they were content with the current frequency. This was influenced by pressures on resources that they associated with inspections.

Businesses' reasons for wanting inspections every 1-2 years, linked to the value they placed in the scheme, as discussed in Chapter 2. In particular, those who valued the role of FHRs in maintaining compliance and managing standards wanted inspections frequently enough to ensure they had an independent view of whether they were meeting food safety and hygiene requirements. This was the most common reason for wanting frequent inspections.

“I just thought it would be a big effect on how I feel, keeping a better eye on people's scores and make sure that the hygiene is keeping up to standard.”

(Wales, small business (<10 employees), 3 FHRs rating)

“Well, I think a year's a fairly reflective time scheme against the business, and I think a lot can change in a year, a lot can stay the same in a year depending on your business. So, I

think that's a fairly regular timescale to say."

(England, small business (10-24 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

A few businesses suggested that they should receive less frequent inspections because of the lower risk nature of their business (e.g. dealing with pre-packaged foods only). For example, a community food bank in England said they felt less frequent inspections would be appropriate because they felt the risks to those who used the food bank were low. Likewise, a specialist small food business said they were open to inspections happening less frequently, and thought this would be appropriate given the nature of their business. However, other similar businesses wanted their inspection frequency to be in line with other businesses overall.

"For the likes of us where things don't change that often, it works fine. I think for takeaways and your food preparation places I think they should be inspected more frequently."

(England, small business (<10 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

Views about inspection frequency were more mixed among large businesses. On the whole, they wanted inspections at least every two years, because they felt that less frequent inspections would undermine the value of being part of the FHRS. However, most supermarket chains argued that their internal procedures meant they did not require inspections as frequently. They felt it made sense for the FSA to prioritise other smaller food businesses where systems and structures for ensuring compliance might not be in place.

By contrast, a few large businesses were frustrated that they had premises which had not been inspected for several years (three or more years). They felt that inspections should be more frequent to maintain the value and integrity of the scheme. One supermarket referenced inconsistent inspection frequencies across their stores, suggesting that inspections happened less frequently in England than in Wales, despite the nature of the business and associated risks being the same across the different nations.

Some businesses with FHRS ratings of 3 or less wanted more frequent inspections than they currently received. They felt this would help them address suggested improvements and demonstrate that they had changed how they operate. Linked to this, some of these lower rated businesses argued that the way the scheme currently operates means that they can have a lower rating for a long time. Some also did not want to pay the cost of a re-assessment visit and were concerned about waiting longer than expected for a regular scheduled inspection.

"When you get a low grading obviously you feel annoyed and upset that you've got a low grading. My grading won't change unless I pay for someone to come and do a reassessment. That's what it says. So even though I've called them and asked them to come back when I'd done the work that was asked, they haven't been back and that's 2 years down the line."

(England small business (<10 employees), 2 FHRS rating)

3.2 Less frequent inspections for businesses with a good record of compliance

Businesses were asked for their views about less frequent inspections for businesses with a good record of compliance. On balance, businesses across each nation broadly supported this idea in principle, although there were concerns, and a small number of businesses were not in favour of this. Some businesses also discussed how they felt reduced inspection frequencies were already happening within the scheme because of COVID-19 and more general resourcing pressures.

Businesses who supported less frequent inspections did so because they thought it was unlikely that a business would change its practices following an extended period of compliance with food hygiene standards. Others also suggested that less frequent inspections could work as an incentive for businesses to seek to achieve and maintain compliance. Some businesses also argued that it would free up FSA and local authority resources to focus on businesses that were in greater need of inspections. Support for reduced inspections was consistent across all businesses with different FHRS ratings.

“I think if they have got a consistently good track record, yes, I have the sense I think it needs to target businesses that aren't quite reaching the standard.”

(Wales, medium business (50-249 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

“Yes, I mean, if somebody's got a good track record, let them get on with it. Maybe inspections should be just something like popping in for a quick chat, just to say, 'Have you got any concerns? Can I give you any more information?' Rather than it being a full-on inspection every time.”

(England, small business (Between 10-24 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

“Yes, in that case, I think it would make sense. It would make sense if someone was getting good reviews over some period of time, yes, it would be reasonable to think that their standards are up to a really satisfactory level all the time. So, it would make sense to do these less.”

(England, small business (Between 10-24 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

However, many of those who supported less frequent inspections in principle noted that any change in management – or a significant amount of staff turnover – should result in a return to more frequent inspections.

“If they consistently scored well it wouldn't need to be so frequent, I think. If there was a change to management and standards were slipping you wouldn't pick up on it as quick, which is the only downfall.”

(Northern Ireland, small business (25-49 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

It is also important to note that business' perceptions of what it meant in practice for inspections to be less frequent varied. This was based on how often they thought inspections should happen overall and their different experiences of inspection frequency over recent years. In England, a longer time between inspections was reported to be more common, and this seemed to shape views. For example, one business in England said that having an inspection every five years would be acceptable for businesses with a strong track record of compliance. By contrast, businesses in Northern Ireland who supported less frequent inspections based on compliance typically suggested every two years. This appeared to be linked to them generally favouring inspections happening more frequently for all businesses.

While most small and medium business supported reduced inspection frequency based on compliance, there were some who had concerns. These businesses argued that reducing inspection frequency based on compliance could lead to lower standards in some currently high performing businesses. They thought an extended time between inspections may make it less likely that businesses would do the work required to keep consistently high standards. Another concern was related to the principle of having different frequencies for very similar businesses. Some thought that this undermined the overall consistency of the FHRS, pointing out that lots can change in a business in the time between inspections.

“I think a lot can change in a year. I think myself, this business is a prime example of that, I've only been here a year and there's a million and one things that have changed in that time, we've got new owners in in that time. So, anything like that, and disruptions due to the kitchen, and you never know day to day in restaurant life, let alone year to year.”

(England, small business (10-24 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

“I don't think it does any harm, just to come in every so often. Yes, okay, everything's great, can proceed as normal, that's great. It's peace of mind for us as well.”

(Northern Ireland, small business (<10 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

Large businesses were more likely to support reduced inspection frequency for compliant businesses than small or medium businesses. They thought that this was an appropriate way to encourage consistently high standards, and to ensure inspections were focused on businesses where compliance was lower.

“I think if you can demonstrate as a business that you have the systems and the frameworks in place and that's borne out by the food hygiene ratings generally that you have as a business, then my view is if I was a local authority I'd want to utilise my resources perhaps elsewhere within my district that needs it more, rather than a large retailer whose brand and reputation is built on great standards.”

(Large retail business)

The only exception among large businesses was a national takeaway chain that pointed out that they experience high staff and management turnover, and that many of their staff are very inexperienced. They valued the FHRS and the inspections as a way of providing an additional check, alongside their own internal controls and audits. They were concerned that changing the inspection frequency could undermine this, and that their large staff turnover could mean that a track record of compliance was not wholly representative.

“I think I would be concerned because although yes we're a big brand, we have some really good controls in place, each store differs because it differs by who manages that store. And we do have a high employment churn rate. So, you could find that since the last visit you've had two different store managers or you've moved a store manager from somewhere else.”

(Large restaurant business)

3.3 Less frequent inspections for higher risk businesses with a good record of compliance

Businesses were also asked more specifically about reducing inspection frequency for businesses that were inherently higher risk, such as butchers, but that had a good track record of compliance. Most businesses generally had a similar view on reducing inspection for compliant high risk businesses as they did for reducing the frequency of inspections based on high compliance more generally.

However, there were a small number of businesses in all three nations that had concerns about reduced inspection frequency for compliant higher risk businesses, even though they supported reduced inspection frequency based on compliance in principle. These concerns focused on a perception that there were good reasons that these businesses were considered higher risk, and that this should be reflected in how often they are assessed as part of the FHRS scheme. The businesses with concerns questioned the reason for reduced frequency and did not feel it was consistent with the overall purpose of the scheme; to ensure compliance with food hygiene standards.

“With a high risk business I would still aim for the yearly length. You're high risk there. You've got an extra type of danger there and I think, no, you wouldn't want to extend that too far because the risk might be too much.”

(Northern Ireland, small business (10-24 employees), 5 FHRS rating)

“It’s still high risk though isn’t it? I think even if they’re consistently good, it could cause people to be a bit more lax if they know they’re not getting checked as often I think. It keeps people’s standard.”

(England, small business (<10 employees), 5 FHRs rating)

A small number of businesses that supported reduced inspection frequency for high risk compliant businesses pointed out that higher risk businesses often faced inspections or audits from other organisations. They felt that if they were being assessed in other ways this would support less frequent inspections as part of the FHRs. Their argument was that any major food hygiene or safety issues were likely to be identified by any non- FHRs inspectors or auditors visiting the premises.

“I have an instinct that there are other regulatory bodies in those companies... I imagine that there is something other than the food hygiene programme for those very high risk areas. I know that there’s quite a lot to do with meat passports, for example, and where meat comes from.” (England, small business (10-24 employees), 4 FHRs rating)

3.4 Using the FHRs scheme to assess other businesses in Wales

Businesses operating in Wales were asked whether they ever used the FHRs scheme in their partnerships with other businesses, for example to check on manufacturers or suppliers. This reflects the different scope of the scheme in Wales. Only a few small and medium businesses in Wales had used FHRs for this purpose, with many saying they had never considered doing so.

“I suppose it [other businesses’ FHRs rating] does, a little bit. If they got a really low score, I don’t know if I’d want to buy stuff from them.”

(Wales, small business (<10 employees), 3 FHRs rating)

Other businesses said that they used other criteria to choose suppliers, including local knowledge or recommendations and personal experience. In these cases, FHRs ratings had no influence on their decision-making.

Large businesses said they did not believe FHRs ratings were taken into consideration when choosing suppliers in Wales. However, they pointed out that this was a supply chain issue that was looked after by other parts of their business. This meant they could not be certain about any role played by FHRs. A large supermarket chain also said they have minimum requirements for FHRs ratings for businesses they use as food concessionaries in their own stores, but that they use other criteria and their own assessments for choosing suppliers.