

Value of FHRs Local Authority research:

Chapter 4 What businesses do local authorities value being in the FHRs?

The scope of the FHRs in England and Northern Ireland extends to establishments supplying food direct to consumers, including restaurants, cafes, takeaways, sandwich shops and other places where people eat food prepared outside of the home, as well as food retailers; in Wales some manufacturing businesses are also included in the scope of the scheme.

Overall, LAs did not highlight specific types of business that they particularly valued being in the scheme. Instead, they emphasised the importance of a consistent approach to assessing food hygiene standards in food businesses like takeaways, restaurants, cafes, and institutions (for example, schools, hospitals and care homes). They did not distinguish between these in terms of the value that the FHRs brings, arguing that protecting and informing consumers about food hygiene across all business types was the main value of the scheme.

In Wales in particular, LAs were generally content with the scope of the scheme and did not want this to change. They felt that it was good that the FHRs covered almost all food businesses in a consistent way, and they considered this a real strength.

“I would say that we're there to look at public safety and public health and there's a uniform level of standard, we're compliant with the law and making things safe... So, I think on the food hygiene grounds alone and public safety, that's the merit in keeping it as it is.”

(LA representative from Wales)

In England and Northern Ireland, LA representatives were more likely to highlight lower risk business types that they felt should not need to be part of the scheme as it currently operates. For these LA representatives, removing some of the lower risk businesses would enable them to prioritise higher risk businesses.

One example LA representatives from England often discussed, was people who have started their own baking business from home during the pandemic. Conducting inspections with these new businesses has been a significant burden on LAs. Some LAs also thought that the requirements of the FHRs were not appropriate for the way home bakers operate or for the low level of risk to consumers. For example, because visits are at the business owner's home, they have to be booked in advance, limiting the value of the inspection because it is not unannounced.

“There are a lot of them – very low risk – and baking cakes once in a blue moon when they get an order, but they still need inspecting. At present, they're new registrations, a lot of them, because they registered during COVID, and they've got to be done by the end of March on the Recovery Plan. Is a cake baker at home a priority? Not my priority but it is the FSA's priority.”

(LA representative from England)

“We're finding that we've got so many sweet makers, sweet cone makers, cake bakers, and it's just actually the resource for us to actually be able to go and do those ones.”

(LA representative from England)

Some LA representatives in England also discussed whether lower risk retailers needed to be included in the scheme, particularly where only pre-packed ambient food was being sold. This includes retailers who sell seasonal food gifts. This view was not shared by all LA representatives in England, but those who discussed it broadly seemed open to these types of businesses being exempt from the scheme. The examples highlighted by the LA representatives from England who took this view included corner shops, off licenses and other low risk businesses. These businesses mostly or only sold a small range of pre-packed foods, and no or very limited foods that needed to be refrigerated. LA representatives from Wales felt all premises should continue to be included in the scope of the FHRS.

“Your standard off license that has tinned goods, and might have a block of cheese, and a few sandwiches in a fridge, all pre-packaged, made somewhere else. The only requirement is the storage temperature.”

(LA representative from England)

“Personally, I think ambient temperature, just wrapped foods should be outside of the scheme.”

(LA representative from England)

LA representatives from Northern Ireland shared similar views to those in England about which businesses should be in the scope of FHRS. They described how home-based businesses had added to their workload, especially as some had registered during the lockdowns but may not be operating anymore. They also described how some venues, such as wet pubs, social clubs and retailers who sell a limited amount of food, which has not been prepared onsite, could be removed from the scheme. This is because they are likely to get a rating of 5 due to a lack of requirements at these premises, and it can take up valuable time in their workloads.

“If they say they're selling sandwiches, they do, and then it has to have the same, we have to go and do the inspection and that's an onerous thing, to go to a retail pharmacist, it's a bit silly just because they sell sandwiches in a refrigerated display. They're going to get a 5 unless the fridge is not working when you go in.”

(LA representative from Northern Ireland)