

Online display of food hygiene ratings by food businesses in Wales: General feedback from the workshop

2.1 Feedback from the icebreaker

The ice breaker provided the opportunity for workshop participants to test and provide feedback on the accessibility and reliability of online food hygiene ratings information from a consumer perspective. There was significant variation in the information available and participants willingly shared their experiences.

Most participants reported that they had used a search engine such as Google to find ratings information about the food businesses they were interested in. Their perception was that whilst consumer awareness of food hygiene rating stickers displayed on premises was high, their awareness of the availability of ratings information on the FSA's website was low. Consequently, they thought consumers would instinctively use a search engine to find ratings information.

Participants reported that searches which included 'food hygiene rating', followed by the name of the establishment, resulted in several website options including scoresonthedoors.org.uk, foodhygieneratings.org.uk, grubbee.co.uk, in addition to the FSA's website. Further, they reported that the FSA's ratings information, the most reliable source, did not appear at the top of the list of results.

It was noted that one of sites provided the four most recent food hygiene ratings and another had not been updated since December 2017, although the establishment had been subject to inspection during the last six months.

One officer who had used a search engine using only the name of the food establishment, reported that no food hygiene ratings information was available.

Officers who selected the FSA's website to access ratings reported that ratings were not immediately available, requiring further input from consumers.

Following discussion of findings from the ice breaker, there was general agreement amongst participants of the need for more reliable and accessible ratings information to be provided online for the benefit of consumers.

2.2 General comments from participants

Following the ice breaker, a facilitated discussion took place with the following views expressed by participants:

- Strong support for more reliable and accessible food hygiene rating information to be provided online, reflecting the move towards increased online purchasing.
- Strong support for a FSA sponsored mobile app in advance of requiring businesses to provide ratings information online. This would provide easier and quicker access to ratings for consumers than through the website and facilitate data capture e.g. about use and activity. The app on consumers home screens would also strengthen recognition of the brand, ensuring it is at the front of their minds. A mobile app may also make it possible to interact with consumers through push notifications.
- Strong support for the FSA to be more proactive in raising consumer awareness about information already available e.g. ratings on the FSA website.
- Strong support for more 'myth busting' e.g. that low ratings are not a consequence of paperwork being out of date.
- Strong support for enhancements to the FSA's website to increase functionality for the benefit of consumers. Participants expressed some disappointment that more development had not taken place. They suggested the need for an improved search engine which would enable consumers to search by: Business type; Establishments within a specified distance from their location; and Ratings e.g. 4 or above.
- Participants reported that reducing the number of screens or 'clicks' consumers have to manoeuvre to access ratings is important as consumers are usually constrained by time.
- Support from participants for ratings information to be provided in map format online, and for the potential to develop this further to include additional layers of information e.g. food sampling results, information about any legal notices served on the establishment and the outcome of any prosecutions.
- Research needed to identify why businesses that strive for a 5 rating are often reluctant to use this in their marketing when they achieve the highest rating.
- Strong support for all aggregators to make ratings available on their websites voluntarily in advance of introducing a legislative requirement.
- Potential for FSA to work with aggregators to research the extent to which consumer behaviour is influenced by improved accessibility and prominence of ratings information on their websites.
- Need to evaluate the impact of requiring ratings information on hard copy material. Has it influenced consumer behaviour and has absence of this information resulted in any consumer complaints?
- Consensus that requiring online display has the potential to further drive up standards.

2.3 Scope and scale of proposals

In respect of the scope and scale of proposals, participants instinctively thought that all businesses currently required to display their rating, who also had an online presence, should be included in the scope of any online display requirements, including those only supplying other businesses as this would assist businesses in monitoring their suppliers.

- The need to define 'online' was emphasised by participants. Overall, participants were of the view that ratings information should be available on businesses' own websites, food platforms like Just Eat and Deliveroo and social media accounts like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.
- There was consensus for the need to provide ratings prior to the point of online purchase and when making a table booking and that absence of this information in an easily accessible form defeats the purpose of the Scheme.
- There was agreement that the presence of the 'real-time' rating on business websites was the preferred position but it was acknowledged that if that was reliant on businesses manually keeping these up to date, consideration should be given to the provision of a bilingual statement signposting consumers to the FSA's website.

- There was consensus that aggregators should be included within scope and there should be a requirement for food hygiene ratings to feature more prominently than is currently the case on their websites. Ratings information should be available at the point where consumers select the food establishment they wish to purchase from, i.e. prior to the point of order, thus enabling their decision to be informed by the rating.
- How chains with generic websites will be able to demonstrate compliance needs careful consideration. To be of benefit to consumers, ratings information specific to each site will be required.

2.4 Barriers for business

From a business perspective the following issues arose from discussions:

- Participants expressed concerns that small businesses may not have access to the IT skills required to populate and update their websites with ratings information.
- Some businesses will rely on third parties for IT support which will almost certainly have cost implications. This may be regarded as an additional burden by Government and consequently may not be supported.
- The timing of published ratings needs consideration as businesses achieving a 5 rating occasionally publish this on their social media accounts immediately following inspection. This is in advance of ratings being published on the FSA's website. This has the potential to confuse consumers. It may be the case that the current timelines set out in legislation for the display of ratings on business premises are not appropriate for online display e.g. 14 days for food business operator to be notified of rating and provided with a food hygiene rating sticker, 49 days for food authority to notify FSA of ratings following receipt by a food business operator of notification of the rating.
- There was strong support for an automated IT solution at low or no cost to businesses. This may prove essential in gaining political support.
- The issue of legacy ratings was raised as an area for further consideration – it is often difficult to remove information which has appeared online which if out of date has the potential to confuse consumers.