

RESEARCH PROJECTS

Understanding Consumer Needs in Relation to Food Hygiene Ratings in an Online Food Ordering Environment

Ipsos¹¹ Ipsos (United Kingdom)

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FSA Research and Evidence

To help ensure there is a robust evidence base for any future proposed legislation requiring the online display of food hygiene ratings, the FSA commissioned Ipsos UK to undertake research among consumers to:

1. Explore specifically where FHRS should be placed online to maximise consumer awareness and use, as well as the best way to present the ratings so that consumers can access meaningful information to make informed choices.
2. Explore where consumers would like to see FHRS ratings displayed online.
3. Explore what consumers think about the current positioning and display of FHRS ratings online, including any misperceptions.

Executive Summary

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2. Explore where consumers would like to see FHRS ratings displayed online.
3. Explore what consumers think about the current positioning and display of FHRS ratings online, including any misperceptions.

Online food ordering behaviour

Ordering food online was a common experience for participants, and one they were familiar and comfortable with. Those who ordered food using online aggregators said they did so because they found it convenient. Aggregators were seen as offering a user-friendly way to discover a wide range of food outlets that can deliver to where they live. Some participants said they ordered directly from individual food outlets online, usually through their websites.

Participants tended to order food from supermarkets less frequently than ordering food to eat immediately from aggregators. Some ordered groceries online only when they were running out of particular items (a 'top up shop'), whilst others mentioned doing their full grocery shop online.

When deciding which individual outlet to order from via aggregators, participants tended to focus on information about cost and delivery times. The ratings and reviews from other customers also shaped decisions. Although choice was seen as a key advantage of using aggregators, many participants said they ordered from a small number of their favourite outlets that they were familiar with and knew they liked.

Food hygiene and the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS)

Participants reflected on how they assumed that food they ordered online would be safe to eat. Most did not consciously consider food hygiene when making decisions. Their assumptions about food safety were based on positive previous experiences and the perception that food outlets must adhere to high hygiene standards.

Those who wanted information about food hygiene tended not to rely on information available via aggregators. These participants often mentioned other online sources, feedback from friends and family, or their own assessment of likely food hygiene from having visited in person.

Some participants were more confident in the safety of food that they order in person because they can see the outlet and how it is run, and from that make assumptions about their hygiene standards. Some also referred to having the food hygiene rating at the entrance of a food outlet to further reassure them about food safety.

When asked directly about food hygiene, participants generally emphasised how important it was to them. They also acknowledged that food hygiene was not a priority until they had a problem. This might

be a negative personal experience, hearing about other people's poor experiences, seeing a low FHRs rating at a food outlet, or seeing unhygienic practices or conditions in person.

There was a good general awareness of FHRs, with participants often referring to it as "scores on the doors". Many participants said they always noticed the food hygiene rating sticker in the door or window when visiting a food business in person. Those who did often said they would not buy food from a food outlet with a low rating. There was more limited understanding of specific aspects of the FHRs and what it covered, with participants often making assumptions rather than knowing for sure.

Some reported that they actively use FHRs ratings when eating at a food outlet in person. However, some participants did not place so much emphasis on FHRs ratings, even where they did see them. They often said they made their decisions based on customer reviews. Others said their reliance on the scheme was more passive because they trusted that restaurants that did not meet the correct hygiene standards would be shut down.

Placement of FHRs ratings online

Overall, participants wanted FHRs ratings to be available and visible online because it would help inform their decisions about where to order from. This was seen as particularly important for food outlets they had never tried before. Many participants emphasised the importance of having the same information about hygiene online that they have when they visit a food business in person.

Most participants had never seen the FHRs ratings when ordering food online. Many thought this information was not available on aggregators. Others assumed the information had to be available even though they had not seen it. A few participants had looked for information about food hygiene when ordering food online, but they had not done so via an aggregator. They reported searching for this information elsewhere.

Only a handful of participants knew where the food hygiene rating was on the aggregators they used and said this informed their decision making. They noted however that it was hard to find. Others who had previously found the FHRs ratings on aggregators were not looking for them specifically.

Participants generally agreed that the requirement to display FHRs ratings online should apply to all types of food businesses. While this was the consensus, there were different views about supermarkets. A few participants thought supermarkets should not have to display this information online because they mainly sell groceries and prepackaged food.

When shown where the FHRS ratings are currently displayed on aggregators, participants generally thought this was not prominent enough or displayed early enough in the customer journey. Many participants felt that, in their current position, the FHRS ratings are too hard to find. Consequently, participants argued that it is unlikely that many consumers ever find the FHRS ratings, often reflecting on their own experience. Given how the FHRS ratings can only be accessed by clicking away from the default food ordering journey, participants questioned how much this information is used by consumers.

There were more mixed views about where FHRS ratings should be displayed. Some were in favour of showing the rating on a food outlet's thumbnail, either on the aggregator's landing page or whenever a consumer uses the search filter and is shown a list of relevant food outlets. Other participants thought that a prominent position on the food outlet's own page on the aggregator site would be the most appropriate and effective location for the FHRS ratings to be shown.

There was a broad consensus among participants that FHRS should be displayed online using the same format as the black and green sticker used at food premises. A few participants said that they would be content with the information being shown in an alternative format. For example, using text similar to the way in which aggregators show customer ratings.

Overall, the research suggests that consumers consider the current location of FHRS ratings online to be 'hidden away' and want them to be more prominent, ideally earlier on in the food ordering journey.. This would provide consumers with a greater degree of transparency about food hygiene standards, which in turn would support consumers using FHRS information to inform their decisions when ordering food online.

Chapter 1: Background and methodology

1.1. Background

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is responsible for food safety across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In partnership with local authorities, the FSA runs the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) to help give consumers clear information about food businesses' hygiene standards.

The Food Hygiene Rating Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 introduced a statutory food hygiene rating scheme in Northern Ireland (with the main provisions of the Act being implemented under the Food Hygiene Rating Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016). The legislation requires food business operators to display their FHRS rating sticker at or near each customer entrance and for these to be displayed in a location where they can be readily seen and easily read by customers before they enter the

establishment. The Act also introduced a legal requirement for food businesses in Northern Ireland to provide information on their rating verbally if requested in person or over the phone. In addition to the above the Act includes a regulation making power regarding the publication of ratings online by food business operators who supply consumers with food that they order using an online facility. This is the last remaining provision of the Act still to be implemented.

In England the display of rating stickers at premises is voluntary for food businesses although businesses are encouraged to display. However, as part of its three-year corporate plan published in March 2023, the FSA has laid out its ambition to work towards introducing primary legislation that makes the display of FHRS ratings mandatory in England.¹ It is expected that proposals would also include a requirement for ratings to be displayed by food business operators who supply consumers with food that they order using an online facility, as well as at physical premises.

The online food ordering market in the UK is large, and its growth has accelerated rapidly following the Covid-19 pandemic.² The Food and Your 2 biannual surveys demonstrate just how large the market is. Wave 6 found that one in three (32%) adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland had ordered takeaway food from an online food delivery company in the previous four weeks.³ In the wave 7 survey six in ten respondents reported that they had ordered food or drink from the websites of a restaurant, takeaway or café (60%) and around half had ordered from an online ordering and delivery company (for example, Just Eat, Deliveroo, Uber Eats) (54%).⁴ Online food delivery aggregators have expanded their offer, with many now also allowing consumers to order groceries from supermarkets and other smaller grocery stores, in addition to ordering pre-prepared food from restaurants, takeaways, cafes and other food outlets.

¹ Food Standards Agency (March 2023), *Three Year Corporate Plan*, p.7, available online at: <https://www.food.gov.uk/board-papers/three-year-corporate-plan>.

² <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/emerging-challenges-and-opportunities/food-business-operators-impact-of-a-changing-landscape>

³ Food Standards Agency (July 2023), *Food and You 2: Wave 6 Key Findings*, p. 48.

⁴ Food Standards Agency (July 2023), *Food and You 2: Wave 7 Key Findings*, Chapter 5.

This research builds on a previous study in 2016 undertaken to support the draft Food Hygiene Rating (Online Display) Regulations (NI) 2016,⁵ and on research carried out with consumers in Wales about FHRS online display in 2019.⁶

1.2. Research objectives

To help ensure there is a robust evidence base for any legislation covering the online display of FHRS ratings, the FSA commissioned Ipsos UK to undertake research among consumers to:

1. Explore specifically where FHRS should be placed online to maximise consumer awareness and use, as well as the best way to present the ratings so that consumers can access meaningful information to make informed choices.
2. Explore where consumers would like to see FHRS ratings displayed online.
3. Explore what consumers think about the current positioning and display of FHRS ratings online, including any misperceptions.

This report sets out the main findings from this consumer research.

1.3. Methodology and sample

In total, 40 participants took part in the research, 20 in Northern Ireland and 20 in England. All participants interviewed had ordered food from an online food aggregator in the last six months. Around 75% of the sample had bought food online from a supermarket (29 participants) or from an individual outlet website (32 participants) in the last six months. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams.

The research took on a qualitative approach and therefore focused on 'the what, how and why' through key themes, examples and quotes. The research did not aim to quantify the prevalence of different views or experiences, and findings cannot be generalised in this way.

To capture a broad range of views, quotas were set across the following demographic criteria:

- Age
- Gender

⁵ Food Standards Agency (2016), *Understanding Northern Ireland consumer needs around Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) information in online retail environments*

⁶ Food Standards Agency (2019), *Food Hygiene Rating Scheme Online Display in Wales*

- Social Grade
- Urbanity (participant-defined)

At least three participants interviewed in each of the nations had a food hypersensitivity.

The following information was collected and monitored at the recruitment stage to further ensure a range of participants were interviewed:

- Working Status
- Parental Status
- Reported awareness of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme
- Whether a participant has bought food online from online supermarkets in the past six months
- Whether a participant has bought food online from a restaurant or takeaway's own website in the past six months

A full breakdown of the sample is included in Annex A.

The design and structure of the interviews was informed by the key research objectives. The topic guides combined structure with flexibility, ensuring key topics were covered in each interview but allowing the interviewer to be responsive and probe further depending on what participants had to say. The interviews first covered consumers' general food ordering habits, before discussing in more detail how consumers go about ordering food online. This was followed by exploring awareness and use of the FHRS. Finally, participants were asked about the placement of FHRS ratings online. The discussion guide is included in Annex B.

Fieldwork was conducted between Wednesday 21 February and Wednesday 27 March 2024. The research consisted of semi-structured individual depth interviews with consumers from various locations across England and Northern Ireland. The interviews were conducted by experienced researchers. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, and participants were given £50 as a thank you for their time and contribution to the research.

During recruitment and at the start of each interview participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that their answers would be anonymised, reported in aggregate form, and handled sensitively. All data was stored and transferred securely at all times.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Data was analysed using a thematic framework approach. Firstly, key topics emerging from the data were identified through familiarisation with the transcripts and through a

group analysis session with the fieldwork team. This led to an analytical framework with a thematic matrix, which was used to code transcripts under agreed subthemes and headings. The analysis then involved reviewing the data in detail, drawing out the range of experiences or views and identifying similarities and differences to develop the thematic narrative in this report.

Chapter 2: Online food ordering behaviour

This section of the report explores the general online food ordering habits and experiences of participants, with a particular focus on their use of online food aggregators.

2.1. Overall online food ordering behaviour

Participants typically said they ordered food online between one to two times a month and one to two times a week.⁷ Ordering food online was a common experience for participants, and one they were familiar and comfortable with.

How often participants order food online was shaped by a range of factors. These included their financial circumstances, how busy they were with work, who they were eating with (for example, when friends or family come to visit), the time of year (for example they tend to order less regularly in January due to resolutions around eating healthier), and discount codes and vouchers from aggregators or individual food outlets.

Participants often described being more likely to order food online for delivery than collection. Many saw the convenience of having food delivered straight to their home as one of the main benefits of ordering online. Other participants spoke about a mix of collection and delivery, preferring to collect when it suited them (either because the outlet was close by or on their way home). Ordering for collection allowed participants to ensure their food was still hot.

For some, notably those living in more rural areas, the ability to use certain food aggregators for home delivery was more limited. In some cases, the aggregators were unavailable, or there were few food outlets it was possible to order from.

⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, participants were recruited on the basis that they had ordered food from an online food aggregator in the last six months.

"I'm in quite a rural [area], ordering online is less frequent because we don't have a huge amount of options in my local town... We do use them, but it's not, like, all the time, you know, it would be once every couple of weeks maybe... Some of my friends in London just do it, like, daily, because there's stuff everywhere. So, not as frequent as some people." – Male, England

The norm was to order food online using an aggregator, but some participants said they occasionally ordered directly from individual food outlets online, usually through their websites. Participants did this if the food outlet was not on aggregators (for example, a local takeaway), or if they are part of a large chain with its own app (for example, McDonalds or Dominos). Participants noted that even if an outlet does use an aggregator to sell food online, it can sometimes be cheaper to order directly from their website.

Overall, participants said they ordered food using online aggregators because they found it convenient. Aggregators were also seen as offering a user-friendly way to discover a wide range of food outlets that can deliver to where they live.

Some participants ordered groceries online, but this was less common. Many preferred buying groceries in person, often only ordering online when circumstances made it difficult to do so. For participants that do commonly order groceries online, this is mainly done using the supermarkets' websites, though some mentioned using aggregators and apps such as Getir.

Participants described ordering a huge range of foods online, with traditional takeaway cuisines (for example, Indian, Chinese, Thai, pizza) being the most popular. Some participants mentioned that they opt to order from food outlets online that offer food they themselves cannot cook.

"Mainly [order online] Thai and Chinese – they are my favourite foods. Also I'm quite a good cook, but some foods I can't replicate. Prefer to order what I can't cook myself." – Female, Northern Ireland

Although some participants mentioned being more adventurous and ordering food from a wide range of restaurants, on the whole participants reported ordering from familiar food outlets. When they were asked about food safety, participants explained that ordering online from more familiar food outlets was one of the reasons they assumed food was safe to eat. This is explored further in Chapters 3 and 4 of this report.

"We would generally usually stick to ordering from a couple of places, because we know what to expect." – Female, Northern Ireland

"I don't think we're too adventurous with trying new places and tend to go to ones we've used before or had recommended... we have a big town close by and there's a big choice of different cuisines [but] we tend to stick to what we know." – Female, England

2.2. Using aggregators to order food online

A wide range of factors influenced participant preferences for specific aggregators. This included the method of transport for delivery (for example some thought Deliveroo was known to use bicycles which led to concerns about food arriving cold), the ability to track the delivery driver on the aggregator platform, the number of food outlets available for a particular postcode, the types of food outlets available (for example there were more food outlets offering healthier options on Deliveroo), and how intuitive the aggregator platform was to navigate.

When deciding which individual outlet to order from via aggregators, participants tended to focus on information about cost (including the price of food, the minimum order fees, delivery fees and availability of deals and offers) and delivery times (which included considering the distance from the food outlet to the delivery address). The ratings and reviews from other customers also shaped decisions, though some were sceptical about their reliability. Participants also described often knowing exactly what they were in the mood for before using an aggregator and appreciated having a search function that allowed them to filter for cuisine type.

"What it's saying is the location and it's saying what the delivery time is. Those are the things that I look out for. The other thing that I look out for is the minimum order. Some places make you order a minimum of maybe £15 so whenever I see no minimum order, that's always a good thing." – Male, Northern Ireland

Although choice was seen as a key advantage of using aggregators, many participants said they ordered from a small number of their favourite outlets that they knew to be good. If choosing somewhere new or that they are less familiar with, participants typically said they would base their decision on reviews (either on the aggregator or from other platforms such as Google maps, Facebook, Instagram or TikTok) or recommendations that they received from friends or family members.

"I will try something new, if it's recommended by someone that I trust, but I'm not likely to just go on and just find something I've never heard of and just try it." Male, England

"I think reputation is important. If someone has used a takeaway before, I'd ask people what they'd recommend – so go with that first. And then we use the usual places we know and like, so we go back to the same places." Female, Northern Ireland

Food hygiene was not a top, spontaneous priority for participants ordering food online, including via aggregators. Very few pointed to information about food hygiene as a factor when choosing a food outlet. However, some participants said they relied on recommendations from people they trusted partly because this gave them more confidence the food will be safe.

This reflects the findings from Food and You 2 research, where quality of food, previous experience, price, location and recommendations from others all ranked higher than hygiene in terms of factors considered when ordering a takeaway.⁸ However, the vast majority of respondents in Food and You 2 (94%) wanted FHRS ratings to be prominently displayed online when ordering food.⁹

Those participants who wanted information about food hygiene tended not to rely or look for this information on the aggregators. These participants often mentioned other online sources (such as Google, Trustpilot and social media reviews), feedback from friends and family, or their own assessment of likely food hygiene from having visited in person. Reading through the reviews within the aggregator was also important because they assumed that this would flag any problems with food hygiene. Very few knew they could find the FHRS ratings on aggregator sites.

"My sister went in person to a restaurant that I've ordered from online, I've never actually been in it, and she was not raving about the staff and cleanliness, so that put me off, and it's one of the ones at the top of the homepage on JustEat."

⁸ Food Standards Agency (July 2023), *Food and You 2: Wave 6 Chapter 4, Figure 17.*

⁹ Food Standards Agency (November 2023), *Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) Food and You 2: Wave 6 Chapter 4, Figure 19. 94% thought that businesses providing an online food ordering service should display their food hygiene rating where it can clearly be seen by customers before they order food.*

I just assumed it was good as it was highlighted at the top, but then after that I decided to stick with big brands like Domino's." Female, Northern Ireland

"Cleanliness makes a big difference ... if there were reviews of [being] unhygienic that would make a big difference [to me]." Female, England

Some participants said that aggregators provided sufficient information about food outlets to enable them to make informed decisions as to where to order from. Others argued that they wanted more information.

2.3. Ordering online from supermarkets

Whilst most participants had ordered groceries online from supermarkets or other stores, they tended to do so less frequently than ordering food to eat immediately from aggregators. Some said they order groceries online only when they were running out of particular items (a 'top up shop'), whilst others mentioned doing their full grocery shop online. As with ordering restaurant food from online aggregators, convenience was a key reason for ordering from supermarkets online.

There were several common reasons for participants preferring to buy groceries in person. The quality and expiration dates of fresh produce was a key concern. Participants noted that they often received fresh food that was not what they would have chosen or would quickly expire. Some were therefore reluctant to order fresh fruit, vegetables, and meats online. Having items substituted out for others was another frustration associated with online supermarket shopping. Problems or concerns related explicitly to food hygiene were not mentioned by participants.

"Frozen and fresh stuff I prefer to buy in person, often not given good sell by dates when you order online. So I prefer to buy in person to get best sell by dates and ensure that'll it be really fresh." – Female, Northern Ireland

"Sometimes you don't get some fruits that maybe you want to eat straight away rather than-, so you might get some bananas or something, and they are maybe very green and you can't eat them yet. Or you might get some bananas that are too ripe and you want them to last the whole week, and they're not going to last." – Male, England

Participants generally agreed that the information provided by online supermarkets was sufficient and comprehensive. Some thought this was similar to the information available when shopping in store. Online supermarket websites were said to provide good filtering options for allergens and dietary requirements, and the ingredients (including

additives) were often listed for each item. Participants also mentioned requiring little information because they were often buying brands they were very familiar with and already had trust in the quality of those goods. The only information that participants felt was missing when buying groceries online was the expiry dates of food.

“No information I can think of that I need when buying from supermarkets, because I know the brands already, I’m picking foods I know already.” – Female, Northern Ireland

“Because you can drill into stuff that they give you. I think they give you most of the stuff like, you know, you can go and get the ingredients online as well. And certain products you can click and it tells you what is in there, so you know if there’s, you know, how processed they are. And that’s what you want to know really. Additives and stuff like that.” – Male, England

Chapter 3: Food hygiene and the FHRS

This section of the report explores how confident participants were that the food they bought online was safe, particularly when ordering via aggregators. It then covers how important participants said food hygiene was to them, before describing awareness and use of the FHRS, both when visiting food businesses in person and ordering online.

3.1. Confidence that food ordered online is safe to eat

Overall, participants tended to assume that the food they ordered online would be safe to eat. Most did not consciously consider food hygiene when making decisions. Their assumptions about food safety were based on positive previous experiences and the perception that food outlets must adhere to high hygiene standards.

“Well, I haven’t had any issues so far, so I would say that it’s absolutely fine... When it comes to the apps, if I order food from Uber Eats or Deliveroo, I feel pretty confident about the hygiene of the food. I haven’t had any bad experiences so far.” – Male, Northern Ireland

As other research has shown¹⁰, consumers generally assume that the food they buy will be safe to eat, and this was reflected in how participants thought about ordering food online. They said they had little or no reason to worry about how safe food they ordered online was to eat. Unless they heard or experienced something that raised concerns, food hygiene did not tend to feature when they made decisions about ordering online.

"I mean, 9 times out of 10 you don't give it any thought really... especially if I'm in this country and I'm not abroad. Every time I go abroad, you probably maybe give it a little bit more thought because you don't know what the food standards are in different countries... I think it's just a general feeling of there are procedures in place to hopefully try and catch everything [in the UK]. But things should in this country be generally safe, it's just a thought I have really, a feeling." - Male, England

While there was confidence about food hygiene and safety overall, some had specific concerns. In particular, some participants were less confident about the delivery process and what happens to their food while in transit. A few worried about food safety if deliveries were delayed, or if something was done to their food before it arrived with them. However, this was not a common concern.

For some, ordering from an aggregator provided them with more confidence about how safe the food would be to eat when compared to the individual website of a specific outlet. This was based on the assumption that aggregators, to protect their own reputation, would have to monitor customer feedback about food hygiene and would remove food outlets from the platform if they received too many complaints.

"You're doing it [ordering food online] on the reputation of the aggregators... because what happens is, you would go back to Just Eat or Deliveroo and you would say, 'Look, the food is terrible.' You know? And they would get complaints... At the end of the day, they're trying to create happy customers and if you're not a happy customer, I think they would stop using a particular outlet because it's ruining their reputation." - Male, England

¹⁰ For example, Wave 6 of the FSA's Food and You 2 research found that 93% of adults in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are confident that the food they buy is safe to eat. See Food Standards Agency (July 2023), *Food and You 2: Wave 6 Key Findings*.

Participants were also more confident when ordering from well-known outlets (for example large chains), or outlets that they have ordered from frequently before. Ordering from outlets they have visited in person was also seen as less risky.

"Pretty confident [about food safety]. Most of the [restaurants] that I use I have been to before in person and they have the scores on their doors (FHRS rating) [which] I definitely use." – Female, Northern Ireland

A few participants wanted more reassurance about the safety of food they ordered online. These participants said they often checked the food hygiene rating of a food outlet in person before ordering food from them online.

"Fairly confident [that the food we order online is safe to eat]. I usually look at the hygiene rating, and if you order from the same place again and again like us you're probably safe." – Female, England

Consumers' past experiences were also important. For example, those who had previously been ill with food poisoning said they were less confident about food safety as a result, including when ordering through aggregators.

At the start I trusted JustEat [in relation to food hygiene], but through experience now, I don't think JustEat regulate the safety of the food from the restaurants they have on their app. Through bad food experiences, like receiving horrible food that I would have thought wouldn't be on JustEat, I realise it is up to yourself to do your own research." – Female, Northern Ireland

Many participants said they were less confident about the safety of food ordered online than food ordered in person. Participants described how being able to observe how the food business operates when visiting in person gave them a better sense of the likely food hygiene standards. In contrast, when ordering online one is 'blind'.

"I would feel more confident [in person], because then you can see them cooking it – so if I saw how they were preparing it and it didn't seem clean, I just wouldn't go back. So when you go in person, you have more confidence because you can see it, and then you can order from them online having seen it in person first." – Female, Northern Ireland

When it came to supermarkets, participants often assumed their processes around food hygiene would be robust, including for online deliveries. Furthermore, participants noted that the majority of food they bought from supermarkets was packaged, which gave them more confidence in the safety of those products.

3.2. Importance of food hygiene

As described previously in this report, very few participants raised food hygiene spontaneously as something they considered when ordering food online. However, when asked directly about food hygiene, participants generally emphasised how important it was to them.

"I think it [food hygiene] should be important but it just literally never crosses my mind." – Female, England

"It [food hygiene] is really important... Since the pandemic, I feel even more strongly that they should use hair nets and gloves." – Female, Northern Ireland

In addition, participants placed the same importance on food hygiene in different circumstances. For example, it did not matter whether they were ordering food online from an aggregator, from a food outlet website, a supermarket – or indeed ordering food in person.

Some participants also acknowledged that food hygiene only became a key priority when they had a problem. This might be a negative personal experience, hearing about other people's poor experiences, seeing a low FHRs rating at a food outlet, or seeing unhygienic practices or conditions in person. Some reflected that this meant they were less likely to think about food hygiene when ordering food online because they did not see the food business in person.

"I think in person food hygiene would matter more, because you are in the environment and seeing it. When ordering online, out of sight out of mind – you don't see it. So as long as the food arrives and looks fine, I don't think about it too much. In person if you are seeing a dirty kitchen, then that would put me off. Or if the table is dirty, that would put me off." – Female, Northern Ireland

Many participants said they noticed food hygiene ratings when visiting a food business in person. Some of these participants said they would not buy food from a food outlet with a low rating. Having the FHRs rating sticker placed visibly as they entered the food outlet made them think about food hygiene. Some reflected on how they did not see this information in a similar way online, and this meant it would not cross their mind.

"Online I don't think about it [food hygiene], as it isn't visible. Online you sort of forget about it because it's not in my face, so it is something I won't even think about. As supposed to when you go somewhere in person, when you walk in its there on the door, so you would have a wee glance at it, and as long as its not a 1 or 2 we're fine. But online I don't think about it as its not visible and in your face." – Female, Northern Ireland

"If I walk into, say, a kebab shop or something or a restaurant and their hygiene rating is like a 3, I do get quite anxious about it and probably wouldn't eat there unless it was the only place." – Female, England

Overall, participants said they did not seek out information about food hygiene when buying food online. However, many also suggested that if this information was available, it would inform their decision about where to order from.

"The food hygiene rating is always kind of, hidden away [online]... I think across all of the apps it's never, sort of, like, first and foremost, or flashes up anywhere. You have to seek it out through little tabs and things. So, it doesn't always spring to mind to go and look for it. I think if it was information that was more readily available then it would have more of a bearing on whether I chose somewhere." – Female, England

"It is important. But weirdly, I don't think information is generally available on the apps. I couldn't see it on the app there. I've never thought about it until now." – Male, Northern Ireland

3.3. Awareness and understanding of FHRS

Local Authorities inspect food businesses to check that they meet the requirements of food law. It is the responsibility of the food business to comply with food hygiene law at all times. The FHRS was introduced to give consumers transparency about the findings of inspections. The rating provides a snapshot of the standards found at the time of inspections. The interviews explored participants' awareness and understanding of the FHRS.

There was a good general awareness of FHRS, with participants often referring to it as "scores on the doors". Many were familiar with seeing the distinctive green and black FHRS stickers when visiting food outlets in person. There was reasonable awareness that each food outlet was given

a rating from 0 to 5. The scheme was understood to be a set of standards around hygiene that all food outlets had to adhere too, and that there were inspections to determine the ratings.

How much participants knew beyond these overall points varied. In particular, there was a limited understanding of specific aspects of the FHRS and what it covered, with participants making assumptions rather than knowing for sure. For example, many assumed the scheme covered how food was prepared and stored, as well as how kitchens were kept clean. Some participants were unsure about whether the scheme included how food outlets handled information about allergens or dietary requirements. There was also some uncertainty about what a rating from 0 to 5 meant, other than it being a scale from 'terrible' to 'great' hygiene standards.¹¹

"I think that it covers how food is prepared, how food is stored. How the waste is disposed of... Best before dates on food. I would assume it covers those things I don't know if it necessarily holds restaurants accountable to displaying information about allergies. I'm not sure if it does. Or about dietary requirements. I don't know if that's part of the rating. It would be interesting to know if it was." – Male, Northern Ireland

This reflects findings from the Food and You 2 survey, which found that awareness of the FHRS is very high (86% reported having heard of the FHRS) but public understanding of the scheme is more varied (55% reported they had heard of the FHRS and knew a lot or a little bit about it, while 31% had heard of the FHRS but did not know much or anything about it). The Food and You 2 survey also found differences between nations. In Northern Ireland, where the display of FHRS information is a statutory requirement, 65% of consumers had heard about the FHRS and knew a lot or a little about it, compared to 54% in England.

Consumers who knew more about the FHRS were mainly those who currently worked (or had previously worked) in a hospitality or care setting, as well as others with a close family member or partner who worked in these sectors.

¹¹ Each rating of 5 to 0 equates to the following: 5 – hygiene standards are very good; 4 – hygiene standards are good; 3 – hygiene standards are generally satisfactory; 2 – some improvement is necessary; 1 – major improvement is necessary; 0 – urgent improvement is required.

Overall, the FHRS was thought to exist to help protect public health and to provide consumers with reassurance that the food they buy is safe to eat. It was also seen as a way of empowering consumers to make informed choices about where they order food from. Consumers were therefore seen as the primary beneficiaries of the FHRS scheme.

"I think the scheme benefits public health, none wants to eat somewhere where food is not stored correctly or where they use the same chopping boards for everything, or that have no hand washing facilities. It's about keeping everyone safe and to stop the spread of salmonella and food poisoning." – Female, Northern Ireland

Participants also argued that the FHRS exists to hold food businesses accountable. There was a strong sense that the scheme benefits food businesses, particularly those who are rated highly, as this could help enhance a food outlet's reputation and attract more customers.

I think it benefits them showing it really. You know, they've been checked out and their premises are good, where they store the food is good. I think it's a must for them really. I'm surprised that they don't, really, offer up the information. I think if I had a restaurant, I would certainly want to show it, you know, that my premises is clean, where I store the foods, for higher quality, stuff like that. It must promote your business surely. – Male, England

3.4. General use of FHRS

Despite the high levels of awareness of the FHRS and the importance that consumers attached to food hygiene, how much participants said they used the ratings varied. Some reported that they actively use FHRS ratings when eating at a food outlet in person. For example, there were many examples of participants who said they would not eat at a restaurant with a rating of 0 to 2. Participants were most likely to use the FHRS rating when trying a food outlet for the first time, with low ratings acting as a deterrent.

"Yes, if the hygiene rating is not good, I would factor that into my decision on whether to eat there or not. It sticks out to me where they have a low rating, and it stays in my head when I see that in their window." – Male, Northern Ireland

However, some participants did not place so much emphasis on FHRS ratings, even when they did see them. They often said they made their decisions based on customer reviews.

"Obviously most places you can see a hygiene rating the second you step in, but I'd be lying if I said I looked at it all the time... But you definitely notice them when you go in the door and you can see them and you go, 'Oh, that's got a 5 star. That's got a 4 star,' whatever. But quite often I will go from reviews when I'm choosing somewhere." – Male, England

Others said their reliance on the scheme was more passive, both in person and when ordering food online. For example, they trusted that the restaurants that did not meet the correct hygiene standards would be shut down, and therefore felt more confident about eating food from outlets that were open for business.

"You kind of think if there was something hugely wrong then you'd hope it would be picked up. You'd have a bit more confidence that at some point something would have happened as a result of huge failings in the kitchen to keep clean, for example. Because I've seen it happen. It happened in one of my local Chinese's, I don't know what it's for, but the hygiene rating plummeted all of a sudden, and they were shut and it had to be fixed. So, you're confident that it will happen when it needs to." – Male, England

Some participants mentioned that they use FHRS information only occasionally or not at all, mainly because food hygiene is not something they are worried about. Most were unaware that this information could be found online, although a few participants said they had searched for food hygiene ratings via the FSA website, particularly when ordering online from somewhere for the first time.

"I don't use it actively, I just see it sometimes. So when I notice it, I will use it. But I did not know you could actively look it up online." – Female, Northern Ireland

"The first time before we've ordered from somewhere, we did look it up on the actual [FHRS] website. I've also used it on the app which is useful ... It gives you an indication of the way the food is prepared, general standards, it gives you give a bit more [information]." – Female, England

Chapter 4: Placement of FHRS ratings online

This chapter explores awareness of FHRS ratings online, particularly on aggregators. It discusses which businesses participants thought should have to display FHRS ratings online, before describing views on where the ratings are currently and where participants thought they should be displayed to meet the needs of consumers.

4.1. Awareness and use of FHRS ratings online

Most participants could not remember seeing FHRS ratings when ordering food online. Many thought this information was not available on aggregators. A few assumed the information had to be available on these platforms even though they had not seen it. Others said they simply did not know because they had never looked for it.

"No, I haven't seen any information about it [food hygiene] online...Would be good to know about the food hygiene. I have ordered from a restaurant that then got shut down for hygiene, and it looked nice, got good reviews, the food tasted good. So if they post the food hygiene score on their door, then they should post it online as well. [It would be] very useful when ordering from somewhere new." – Female, Northern Ireland

"I haven't [noticed it online] but because it's not something that I really think about. I don't know if it's there. I had a quick glance there on Just Eat, I didn't notice it, but it could be there. It might be there." – Female, Northern Ireland

As discussed in Chapter 3, a few participants looked for information about a food outlet's hygiene standards when ordering food online, but they had not done so via an aggregator. They reported searching for this information elsewhere, such as Google, Trustpilot and social media reviews. Sometimes this involved searching for the food hygiene rating itself, other times it involved searching for consumer feedback and reviews that mentioned hygiene.

Only a handful of participants knew where the food hygiene rating was on the aggregators they used and said this informed their decision making. They mentioned however that it was hard to find.

"I realise the [food] hygiene rating is not there and it might be useful to include. It would inform you about how hygienic the place it is. It would factor into my decision making about where to order from, I would not want to order from

somewhere that did not have a good rating as I might be more at risk of getting food poisoning.” – Male, Northern Ireland

Others who had previously found the FHRS ratings on aggregators were not looking for them specifically. For instance, several participants said they had ‘stumbled across’ the information because they had been searching for allergen information or trying to find out about the exact location of a food outlet.

During the interview participants were asked to access the aggregator they were most familiar with and discuss what information they commonly used to choose a food outlet.¹² Several participants noted that they were unable to find information about the food hygiene rating on the aggregator, that it would be useful to have this information available, and that it would inform their decisions about where to order food from.

“I realise the [food] hygiene rating is not there and it might be useful to include. It would inform you about how hygienic the place it is. It would factor into my decision making about where to order from, I would not want to order from somewhere that did not have a good rating as I might be more at risk of getting food poisoning.” – Male, 24, C1, Northern Ireland

4.2. Types of businesses displaying FHRS ratings online

Overall, participants wanted FHRS ratings to be included online because it would help inform their decisions about where to order from. This was seen as particularly important for food outlets they had never tried before.

Participants generally agreed that the requirement to display FHRS ratings online should apply to all types of food businesses. If a food business was handling or preparing food and selling it online, they should display FHRS ratings. This included restaurants, take aways, cafes and supermarkets. They thought this information should be shown in all online contexts, including on aggregators and individual websites for consistency. Participants often pointed to how supermarkets sell food prepared on site like sandwiches or sushi, and have counters where food is being handled by staff.

¹² They did this after being asked how confident they were that the food they ordered online was safe to eat, but before discussing the FHRS.

"[There] should be no differences between outlets, if they are preparing food, then all should adhere to the same standards. So regardless they should all have the hygiene rating online." – Female, Northern Ireland

"I think all types [should display FHRS ratings], from takeaways to supermarkets to convenience stores, pubs, restaurants. I think it's just what the customers deserve to know and then make informed decisions about." – Female, England

While this was the general consensus, there were different views about supermarkets. Some participants thought supermarkets should not have to display this information online because they mainly sell groceries and prepackaged food rather than preparing and cooking food for customers to eat.

"I think if they [supermarkets] get FSA checks then they should show them [FHRS ratings] as well... I, sort of, just put a lot of blind faith into it and it would be nice to actually know the hygiene standards and then I might choose to potentially shop somewhere else that has a better hygiene rating." – Female, England

"I don't think that supermarkets should have to [display FHRS ratings], because their food is all packaged... I think it's only necessary to see this [for] restaurants or takeaways." – Male, Northern Ireland

Many participants emphasised the importance of having the same information about hygiene online that they have when they visit a food business in person. Some thought it was even more important to have access to this information online because one is unable to observe how hygiene standards are being met on the premises.

"It [FHRS rating] should be online, absolutely. I've not noticed online, but I think it definitely should be. [For] the same reason they place it on the entrance and the exit for the customers. It should be in that prime position to let the customers know, either way, 'Your free to eat here without any worries of hygiene.'" – Male, England

In Northern Ireland, participants argued that if displaying the food hygiene rating on the premises was a legal requirement, then it should be the same for all food businesses online.¹³

"I didn't know it was a legal requirement in Northern Ireland, but I can't think of a reason as to why it shouldn't be a legal requirement for all businesses to show this information online as well. If you have it in person, then you should have too online." – Male, Northern Ireland

Participants described benefits they associated with displaying FHRS ratings online for both consumers and food outlets themselves. Participants argued that having information about the food hygiene rating available online would help inform consumers when making decisions about where to eat and make them feel more confident that their food was safe to eat. Furthermore, many were of the view that it was in the interest of food outlets to show this information, particularly if they had a high rating.

"It would be great. All the things the food hygiene rating does not consider, the reviews do that, so in collaboration, the two would help you decide better... When I see it on the window, it helps me make my mind up, so if I see it online, it would help me make decisions. If its legal necessity to display them in premises, it should be the same online, for all businesses." – Female, Northern Ireland

"I think it benefits them [food outlets] showing it [FHRS ratings] really. You know, [it shows] they've been checked out and their premises are good, where they store the food is good. I think it's a must for them really. I'm surprised that they don't, really, offer up the information [online]. I think if I had a restaurant, I would certainly want to show it, you know, that my premises is clean... It must promote your business surely." – Male, England

¹³ It is important to note that participants were told during the interview that it was a legal requirement in Northern Ireland.

4.3. Current placement of FHRS ratings on aggregators

In the final section of the interview, interviewers showed participants an example of where FHRS ratings could be found on aggregators Just Eat, Deliveroo or Uber Eats. The aggregator shown was randomly selected by the interviewer (see appendix for further details). There are differences as to how FHRS ratings are shown on the three aggregators:

- On Deliveroo, FHRS ratings are accessible by clicking on the 'Info Map, allergens and hygiene rating' link listed beneath the name of the food outlet and general information relating to delivery times, location, closing time, minimum order fee and delivery fee. A pop-up box then appears which contains the FHRS rating alongside other details about the food outlet.
- On Just Eat, FHRS ratings are accessible by clicking on the 'Information' tab located next to the 'Menu' tab. The FHRS rating is then listed alongside other details about the food outlet.
- On Uber Eats, FHRS ratings are accessible by clicking on the white circle radio button containing three black dots in the image header for the selected food outlet, and then clicking on the 'Store info (Address, ratings and more)' option in the menu that appears. A pop-up box then appears in which the FHRS rating is listed alongside other details about the food outlet.

When shown where the FHRS ratings are currently displayed on aggregators, participants generally thought this was not prominent enough or displayed early enough in the customer journey. They often described the FHRS ratings on aggregators as hidden away, not drawing any attention, and requiring too many clicks to access. Some thought this placement gave the impression that food outlets were not being transparent and trying to deliberately conceal the information.

"It looks a bit sneaky. They shouldn't hide it. They are not being transparent it's like they are trying to hide something. People need to know about it they probably just think the food sounds nice but you need the information in your face."
– Female, Northern Ireland

"I think they really don't want anybody to see it. I mean, most people wouldn't think of going there... I really don't think they want people to see that information. It's really difficult to find where it is." – Female, England

Participants argued that it is unlikely that many consumers ever find the FHRS ratings, often reflecting on their own experience. They therefore questioned how much the information is used. Participants said that whilst they were unlikely to go looking for the FHRS ratings, if they were displayed more prominently, this would be more likely to inform their decisions about where to order food from.

"I wouldn't look for it [food hygiene rating] but if it was displayed, I would use the information, it would factor into my decision making." – Male, Northern Ireland

"I think in my case it [current FHRS rating placement online] means that I just forget about checking the food hygiene [rating]. I feel that if it was more obviously placed then I would take it into account when I was choosing somewhere to eat from. It would have a much bigger bearing on my choice." – Female, England

Some suggested that finding out where the FHRS ratings could be found meant they would use this information in future. This was particularly the case if they were considering ordering from somewhere new. As a result, participants argued that having easy access to that information would benefit food outlets by making people feel safer about trying a new place.

"But it is not overt and businesses could be losing out, like I won't try a new place necessarily because I'm afraid of the hygiene, but if I saw the rating I would be more confident, so what's the reason of hiding it away... For restaurants that want to advertise in those apps, it's easy to show the rating more upfront, [it] will attract more customers, I will use it going forward now I know it exists, especially when eating at new places I haven't eaten at before." – Female, Northern Ireland

"I feel like if it [FHRS rating] was somewhere else and, say, for instance, you were trying something that's new, you've gone onto the new section, onto the new page, you're seeing this amazing, I don't know, spaghetti and then this is underneath also, I think that's just going to enhance your decision." Male, England

4.4. Preferences for placing FHRS ratings on aggregators

Whilst there was a clear consensus that the FHRS ratings had to be displayed more prominently, opinion was more mixed about where would be most effective.

Some were in favour of showing the rating on a food outlet's thumbnail, either on the aggregator's landing page or whenever a consumer uses the search filter and is shown a list of relevant food outlets. Participants suggested that it could be placed alongside the customer rating already displayed.

Having the information displayed on the thumbnail before entering the food outlets individual homepage was seen as equivalent to food outlets displaying the FHRs stickers on their doors. Taking this similar approach online would allow participants to see this information very quickly before deciding whether to click through to look at the menu and other options in more detail. It would also allow consumers to more easily use the information to make comparisons between different food outlets.

"I think it should be on the main screen where you see the thumbnails of all the restaurants, next to the reviews – because that is like your front door online." – Female, Northern Ireland

"[Display the FHRs rating] right where they display the name of the restaurant. Just beneath that... Because it wouldn't take more space and people can see it at a glance... that would make it easier. So, I wouldn't bother clicking on the ones that have low ratings, you know. That would be best... on the page where all the restaurants are." – Female, England

"I think it should be on the photo thumbnail when restaurants come up that are on your radius, that would be the most transparent place to show it, and it also saves unnecessary traffic, [you] don't even have to click to restaurant homepage to find the information, you should see it in the thumbnail." – Female, Northern Ireland

Other participants thought that a prominent position on the food outlet's own page would be the most appropriate and effective location for the FHRs ratings to be shown. Reasons for this included having the hygiene rating alongside all the other relevant information they use to decide whether to order, and there being more room on the food outlet's own page to display the rating a larger size and therefore attract more attention.

"So I think it should be somewhere, like, as soon as you click on a place, in that white space next to it. Next to the name of the place. So that it's instantly visible, I think. And then it encourages people to think about it, as well. I wouldn't have really thought about it when ordering a takeaway but if it's right instantly there then it encourages people to think about it a bit more." – Male, England

Some participants argued the information should be displayed on both the thumbnail and on the food outlet page. That way there was more chance that consumers would notice it and use the information. For example, some suggested that a smaller icon could be used on the thumbnail and that further information (like the last inspection date and what each rating meant) could then be found on the food outlet homepage.

4.5. How FHRS ratings should be displayed on aggregators

Participants generally thought that FHRS should be displayed online using the same format as the black and green sticker used at food premises.¹⁴ The main reasons were that the green and black sticker was bold and stood out, and that it was beneficial to use an image that people were already familiar with. Participants thought people would instantly recognise it and understand and digest the information more easily, and be more likely to use it. Overall, participants saw no reason to change the display format.

"I think what's displayed, sort of, in shops is quite well known... I think if you were to change that image, people might not recognise it as much. I would say I'm quite happy with it being, sort of, kept as is." – Male, England

"For me I'm a visual learner. That sticker is good because it's quite bold and straight to the point. You don't need it in writing, and that would be too much information. Especially if it the sticker is above the menu that would be enough." – Female, Northern Ireland

"I just think it stands out. Like, the stickers tend to stand out." – Female, England

A few participants said that they would be content with the information being shown in an alternative format. For example, using text similar to the way in which aggregators show customer ratings.

Another suggestion for how the information could be displayed on the thumbnails of food outlets was to just have the rating itself (the number 1 – 5 in a black circle) next to or above information about customer reviews. When a consumer hovers over the score, the familiar green and black FHRS sticker in its entirety could pop up. This would make it easier to display the information in the small space available on the thumbnail.

¹⁴ Where FHRS ratings are currently available on Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats, these are displayed using an image of the FHRS sticker.

More information about the score could then be displayed on the food outlets homepage. For example, information about the most recent inspection date.

Overall, the research suggests that by making FHRS more prominent and accessible online, consumers are more likely to notice the ratings. This is likely to raise awareness about the FHRS and enable consumers to access and use the information when deciding where to buy food online (as many currently do at physical premises).

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Below we summarise the main conclusions from the research. These are important to bear in mind when considering consumer priorities for displaying FHRS ratings online in Northern Ireland and England, and reflect the findings from previous research.¹⁵

- With a few exceptions, participants did not spontaneously consider food hygiene or the FHRS when ordering food online. They assumed the food they ordered online would be safe to eat unless they previously had a bad experience with a specific food outlet, or had heard about problems from other people (either through word-of-mouth or via online consumer reviews).
- However, when prompted, participants emphasised how important food hygiene was to them. This meant they would like to see more information about food hygiene standards – specifically FHRS ratings – when ordering food online, whether via aggregators or an outlet’s own website or app.
- Participants argued that the FHRS ratings were not displayed prominently enough or early enough in the customer journey on aggregators. They described the FHRS ratings as hidden away and not best placed to draw consumers’ attention.
- Participants generally wanted information about FHRS to be available online when ordering food in a way that is equivalent to their experience of seeing the green and black ratings stickers displayed in food outlets when they visit in person.

¹⁵ For example: Food Standards Agency (2016), *Understanding Northern Ireland consumer needs around Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) information in online retail environments*; Food Standards Agency (2019), *Food Hygiene Rating Scheme Online Display in Wales*

- There were some different views on where the information should be provided via aggregators to make it prominent enough. Some wanted FHRS ratings to be visible when browsing for outlets, while others preferred that the ratings were included near the top of an outlet's own page alongside other key information.
- Participants usually wanted FHRS ratings to be shown online in a format similar to the familiar green and black sticker they associated with the FHRS when visiting food outlets in person.
- The conclusions reflect the findings from previous research which found that consumers want to have access to FHRS information early on in their online food ordering journey, and that this information should be displayed as prominently online as it is at physical food premises.¹⁶



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¹⁶ For example: Food Standards Agency (2016), *Understanding Northern Ireland consumer needs around Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) information in online retail environments*; Food Standards Agency (2019), *Food Hygiene Rating Scheme Online Display in Wales*

Supplementary Materials

Annex A & B

Download: <https://science.food.gov.uk/article/123520-understanding-consumer-needs-in-relation-to-food-hygiene-ratings-in-an-online-food-ordering-environment/attachment/245309.docx>
