

POTENTIAL FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOOD HYGIENE INFORMATION SCHEME

1. Purpose of the paper

1.1. This paper requests a decision on the most appropriate approach to developing the Food Hygiene Information Scheme (FHIS).

2. Summary

2.1. The FHIS provides at-a-glance information for consumers about food hygiene compliance assessed during local authority inspections. Its primary aim is to assist with informing consumer choice but this in turn is expected to exert a positive influence on food hygiene standards achieved by businesses.

2.2. The FHIS is managed and supported by Food Standards Scotland (FSS) in partnership with local authorities and all Scottish local authorities have adopted the scheme voluntarily.

2.3. The scheme has a two-tier format, with outcomes being either 'Pass' or 'Improvement Required'. Food business operators are provided with certificates and stickers to display voluntarily at their establishments but all results are published on-line by the FSA on a UK-wide platform.

2.4. A six-tier Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS), with outcomes rated 0-5, is operated in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

2.5. The FHIS has operated successfully with its current format since its 2006-08 pilot. However, recent evaluations of the FHIS and the FHRS commissioned by the FSA^{1 2} have found that, although consumer recognition of FHIS stickers/certificates has increased, consumer recognition of the scheme and its use as a factor in consumer purchasing choice remained low. The estimated impacts of the FHIS indicated that the effect it exerted on business compliance was in the same positive direction as the FHRS. However, the effects on compliance for the FHIS were not found to be statistically significant.

2.6. Although the evaluation of the FHIS points to a need for greater promotion of the scheme, it may also be appropriate to review its nature and scope. The Eat Safe Award, operated in Scotland since 2005, recognises businesses that achieve standards beyond compliance. It is currently separate from, but compatible with, the FHIS. Should the Board agree to a review of the FHIS, it may be appropriate to review the Eat Safe Award in parallel.

¹ The Food Hygiene Rating Scheme and the Food Hygiene Information Scheme: Evaluation findings 2011-2014

² Evaluation of the impact of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme and the Food Hygiene Information Scheme on food hygiene standards and food-borne illnesses: Final report

3. Background information

3.1. The Scottish Food Advisory Committee (SFAC), which provided advice to FSA with regard to Scotland, requested background briefing on the development of the FHIS in Scotland, the key similarities and differences between the FHIS and the FHRS and the scope for further development of the FHIS. Further background based on briefing produced for SFAC is annexed together with the paper discussed by the FSA Board on 25 March 2015 on the FHRS.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Food (Scotland) Act 2015 provides primary legislative powers for a statutory food hygiene information scheme. This paper does not seek the Board's views on the issues associated with developing a statutory scheme. However, the potential for development of a statutory scheme may be relevant to the scope and nature of a review of the FHIS at this stage.

4.2. All thirty two Scottish local authorities have adopted the FHIS voluntarily and information on hygiene standards for over 45,000 Scottish food businesses is available on the UK-wide platform. Development of the FHIS has involved strong partnership with local authorities and its current design takes account of the resources required from their environmental health services for its operation. This is particularly important in relation to FHIS inspections, which are integrated with those being undertaken as part of local authority official controls delivery.

4.3. In addition to its two-tier format, key design criteria of the FHIS when initially implemented were as follows:

- i. The Pass standard should not exceed legal compliance in order to avoid perceived regulatory creep.
- ii. The assessment of compliance should be based solely on food hygiene legislation. It therefore does not include wider areas of food law such as labelling, composition or aspects of traceability.
- iii. The scope of the scheme should be restricted to establishments supplying food directly to the public. It therefore does not include establishments such as manufacturers and wholesalers that only supply on a business to business basis.
- iv. The assessment of outcome (Pass or Improvement Required) should be based on current compliance and should not include consideration of past compliance.

4.4. The social, economic and policy landscapes as well as consumer concern about food following the horsemeat incident have changed significantly in Scotland since the scheme was designed. Consumers also behave in quite different ways since the launch of the FHIS with mobile phone and digital technologies and the widespread use of social media influencing consumer choice more significantly since the scheme was designed. These represent new channels used by consumers for accessing and exchanging information.

4.5. Pressure on public funding has also increased significantly during this period and is unlikely to change going forward. This has driven an increasing need to ensure that inspection effort is focussed where the risk of noncompliance is greatest. An increasingly intelligence-led approach to targeting inspections will mean that businesses that are compliant will be inspected less frequently and it is known that consumers will attach less value to inspection results that they perceive as no longer current.

4.6. The FHIS is viewed positively by local authorities and is found helpful by the majority of consumers who have used it. Its current two-tier format and its 'Pass' definition are beneficial in terms of:

- i. consistent application by local authorities;
- ii. reduced likelihood of appeals by businesses against local authority decisions; and
- iii. reduced requests by businesses for revisits to reassess compliance following remedial action by food business operators.

Consistency of application and efficiency of operation will remain important factors in any review of the scheme.

4.7. Consumer choices are often a powerful influence on the behaviour of businesses. The FHIS could therefore be a potent means of harnessing consumer power to benefit public health and the wider interests of consumers. In order to achieve these aims the scheme needs to be:

- i. designed to meet the needs and expectations of consumers as a tool they will want to use to inform their purchasing decisions;
- ii. widely recognised, well understood and readily accessible to consumers at the point of choice and designed to enable consumers to make distinct choices about where they eat; and
- iii. recognised as beneficial for compliant businesses and designed to encourage businesses to maintain and improve compliance.

4.8. FHIS and FHRS results are currently hosted by the FSA on a single searchable web-based platform for use by consumers. The FSA has offered to continue to publish FHIS results on this platform. Changes to the nature, scope or format of the FHIS that affect its compatibility with FHRS ratings could impact on the sustainability of a single platform.

5. Options for review

5.1. The proposed options for review are to consider:

- i. Should the FHIS stay the same?
- ii. Should the FHIS change, if so what would the Board suggest should be the desired outcomes of any change?

- iii. Would a targeted campaign to promote the scheme in Scotland be a more effective approach to achieving improved outcomes for consumers?

6. Identification of risks and issues

- 6.1. There are no anticipated risks associated with a review process, provided that all stakeholders are assured that any proposals to change aspects of the scheme that may arise from a review will fully consider the relevant impacts of different options.
- 6.2. The benefits of any proposed options for change to the scheme will need to be considered against any potential loss of consumer awareness if the changes represented a different scheme in the eyes of consumers rather than development of the current scheme.
- 6.3. Changes to the nature, scope or format of the FHIS could impact on the sustainability of a single FSA/FSS platform for publication of all FHIS and FHRS results across the UK.
- 6.4. Any amendment to the scheme must be delivered with minimal impact on local authority resources and local authority engagement is critical to the review process.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1. A review of the FHIS is recommended as the immediate priority for developing the scheme, with a target of 12 months for completion. In order to build on existing consumer awareness the review should have particular regard to the potential for evolution of the current scheme rather than an approach that would appear fundamentally different.
- 7.2. Development of the FHIS brand followed by a targeted promotional campaign is recommended once the Board has determined the future scope, or format of any revised scheme.

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