

Safety's on the menu

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The Food Standards Agency's Michael Jackson discusses what the new Food Hygiene Rating Scheme means for business

Food poisoning affects about a million people a year in the UK. This figure includes more than 1,500 reported cases of food poisoning in Northern Ireland, with many other cases going unreported.

Cross-contamination, improper handling and inadequate temperature control of food are among the most common causes of food-borne diseases. For food businesses, food poisoning incidents, suspected or otherwise, can have a devastating effect, as sales dwindle, reputations take a nose-dive and scrutiny into hygiene practices are increased.

The present economic climate is such that consumers are increasingly choosy about how they spend their money; food hygiene is no longer accepted as an after-thought.

The results of a recent survey revealed that 86% of people in NI consider food hygiene as a significant consideration when choosing where to eat out or purchase food — more so than traditional considerations such as pricing or location. With stats like this food businesses who disregard food safety do so at their peril.

Improving hygiene standards is not just a matter of implementing and enforcing government regulations but is also about educating and encouraging businesses to be more aware of food safety. This is where the recently launched Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) plays an important role.

Launched in June, the nationwide scheme, which was developed by the Food Standard Agency (FSA) in partnership with district councils, has been rolled out across NI and parts of England and Wales. It allows for uniformity and clarity for businesses with regard to food hygiene.

The FHRS sees environmental health officers, as part of their normal food safety inspections, rate premises on a scale from zero to five with zero meaning "urgent improvement necessary" and a five rating representing a "very good" level of compliance with food safety law. Premises receiving a three rating are considered "generally satisfactory" or broadly compliant.

The new scheme replaces previously piloted schemes such as 'Scores on the Doors' and has been implemented on the back of consultations with and the recommendations of industry experts from the hospitality sector. In Northern Ireland, Good Food NI and Northern Ireland Tourist Board are among those organisations which have thrown their weight behind the scheme recognising the importance of transparency when it comes to communicating standards and the subsequent contribution that FHRS can make to the overall consumer and visitor experience in Northern Ireland.

In practical terms the scheme offers a number of benefits to business over and above previously piloted schemes including:

- An appeal procedure;
- A 'right to reply' for publication (together with the food hygiene rating) online; and
- A mechanism for requesting a re-inspection/re-visit, for the purposes of re-rating when improvements have been made.

Environmental health officers are also on hand to offer advice on how to get a rating improved. Importantly, this is all available at no extra cost to businesses.

In addition, the FHRS offers businesses a viable opportunity to differentiate themselves from their competitors as food outlets are encouraged to display the green and black hygiene ratings stickers and certificates at their premises. Although at this stage there is no legal requirement for a business to visibly display their rating, consumers will rightly ask why the rating isn't being

displayed — which can create negative perceptions of a business.

Any business with a low rating, hoping to fly below the radar, should be aware that all ratings are available online at food.gov.uk/ratings and consumers are urged to keep checking the website for any new or upgraded ratings. If it is a choice between eating at a low-rated venue or a high-rated venue, evidence has shown that consumers will choose the higher rated venue.

To date more than 11,000 food outlets in 17 participating council areas have been rated under the new scheme, from local takeaways, restaurants, butchers and bakeries to hotels, supermarkets and bed and breakfasts. An impressive 76% of these premises rated in NI have scored either a four or the top — five out of five — rating. Further councils are due to join the scheme in the near future.

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