

NATIONAL FOOD HYGIENE RATING SCHEME
(Report by Head of Environmental and Community Health Services)

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to seek Members' approval to migrate from the Council's current 'Scores on the Doors' (SOTD) scheme to the National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) operated by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and to apply to the FSA for a grant to fund the associated costs.

2. Background Information

- 2.1 In June 2008 Members approved the adoption of the current 5-star Scores on the Doors Scheme whereby the food hygiene ratings of Huntingdonshire's food businesses are published on a website.
- 2.2 The SOTD scheme, which applies to all caterers and takeaway businesses, involves food hygiene rating scores that are assessed during a routine inspection being published on the Council's website in a star rating format. The information provided is easy for the public to understand and enables them to make an informed choice about where to eat out. Businesses can be awarded up to five stars. The higher the standard of compliance, the more stars are awarded. Very poor standards are rated as zero. Businesses are provided with certificates and window stickers which can be displayed in their premises.
- 2.3 Huntingdonshire is one of 125 Local Authorities in England and Wales currently operating the Scores on the Doors scheme hosted on a website maintained by Transparency Data, a private IT company, under the terms of a fee-paying contract. This scheme has operated very successfully and has been a factor in improving food hygiene standards within local food businesses, and promoting and empowering consumer choice. Since the scheme went live in Huntingdonshire the website has received over 170,000 'hits' (approx 1000 'hits' a week).
- 2.4 In November 2010, following a period of consultation with local authorities, the Local Government Group, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, consumers, the food industry, the Better Regulation Executive and the Local Better Regulation Office, the FSA launched its own scheme under the title of the National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. Their aim is that it will be up and running in all local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in time for the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. The Government is also keen for there to be a single food hygiene rating scheme operating across the whole of the UK, a position endorsed by Lord Young in his report entitled 'Common Sense, Common Safety' published in October 2010.

- 2.5 The National FHRs is similar to our current 5-star scheme but operates a different banding for assessing ratings and scores and uses different symbols



- 2.6 Since the launch of the National FHRs around 70 local authorities have joined the scheme and a further 50 have migrated from their current scheme. This effectively means that currently there are two hygiene rating schemes operating across the country.
- 2.7 In order to expedite the process of establishing the National FHRs as the single UK scheme, the FSA have now 'bought out' Transparency Data's intellectual and property ownership rights for the software and have also purchased all of the local authority contracts from the company. In effect, this means that after 31 March 2012 our current service provider and IT platform will cease to be maintained.
- 2.8 The FSA has recently announced that it will be developing the IT system for publishing ratings to ensure that it has the functionality needed by local authorities and is as easy as possible for consumers to use. Their website will now be revamped using Transparency Data's expertise.
- 2.9 The FSA has also made a commitment to support local authorities migrating to the National FHRs by:
- providing a free IT platform (with helpdesk support) for publishing ratings. Local Authorities will be able to have a link from their websites direct to the FSA hosting platform.
 - covering the cost of certificates and stickers for businesses.
 - providing grant funding for local authorities to cover the costs of preparatory activities necessary prior to launch.
 - establishing a 'Priorities Fund' to cover the costs that authorities may face from unexpectedly high levels of re-visit requests from businesses – this will provide insurance for the period in which the FHRs is bedding in and likely demand for re-visits becomes clearer.
 - issuing the FHRs 'Brand Standard' which provides advice and guidance to local authorities on implementation and operation of the scheme.
 - producing a 'Communications Toolkit' that includes advice and guidance on promoting the scheme locally, including case studies and template press releases.

- providing template materials for use with businesses and consumers and leaflets to explain what the scheme is about
- promoting the scheme on a national basis.

3. Implications

3.1 This Council has previously chosen not to migrate to the FSA's National FHRS because of the associated costs (estimated at about £14K), the implications on current staff resources, the requirement to carry out re-scoring inspections at the request of businesses. The FSA's website for hosting the scheme was also vastly inferior to the IT platform we are currently using.

3.2 However, in view of the facts identified above and the opportunity to apply for grant funding from the FSA to help meet the associated costs of migrating, this position needs to be reviewed.

3.3 The FSA states that having a single national scheme means that consumers will be able to compare like for like wherever they are and means that businesses can have the reassurance that they are being treated fairly and consistently with their local, regional and national competitors.

3.4 The FHRS is similar in many respects to the current SOTD scheme, however there are some significant differences:

- The scope of the FHRS includes a number of premise types which are currently not rated on our SOTD scheme and excludes producers and home caterers several of which we currently have included on the scheme
- There is a formal right of appeal if a business is dissatisfied with their rating and a right to request a revisit for the purposes of re-scoring. This requirement will obviously have some staff resource implications. The FSA has indicated however that should there be an 'excessive' number of requests for revisits which impacts on a local authority's planned intervention programme then, where appropriate, they will make additional funding available.
- The certificates and window stickers are FSA branded, although local authorities will need to pay to have their logos included.
- Our current SOTD website also lists those premises which have received healthy eating awards, such as 'Tips on Chips'. The FSA website will not be able to host local awards.
- Under the FSA's FHRS the banding ranges used to determine a business's hygiene rating, while based on the same national assessment criteria, are interpreted differently. This in effect will mean that, based on current data, the number of businesses in Huntingdonshire receiving a 5-score award (classified as excellent) will significantly increase under the FHRS when compared to the existing SOTD 5-star scheme. This may reduce the incentive for many businesses to improve their hygiene management.

Tables 1 and 2 below show the effect of proposed changes:

Current SOTD Scheme	Descriptor	No of premises	Percentage
5 Stars	Excellent	242	33.75%
4 Stars	Very good	232	32.35%
3 Stars	Good	165	23.01%
2 Stars	Fair	55	7.67%
1 Star	Poor	14	1.95%
No Stars	Needs major improvement	9	1.20%

Table 1. Current SOTD Scheme Food Hygiene Ratings

FSA's National FHRS	Descriptor	No of premises	Percentage
5 Plates	Very good	430	59.97%
4 Plates	Good	116	16.17%
3 Plates	Generally satisfactory	119	16.59%
2 Plates	Improvement necessary.	17	2.37%
1 Plate	Major improvement necessary.	28	3.90%
No Plates	Urgent improvement necessary.	7	0.97%

Table 2. Proposed food Hygiene Ratings under the FSA's FHRS

- 3.5 There would be significant resource implications in migrating from our current scheme to the FSA's National FHRS. This will include publicising the new scheme, answering queries from businesses and the public, producing certificates and window stickers and recalling the existing ones, reviewing the database and downloading data to the new website. There would also be ongoing additional work once the new scheme is established, such carrying out re-scoring visits where requested.
- 3.6 The FSA has recognised that local authorities will need some financial assistance in migrating to the FHRS and to that end have ring fenced grant funding for 2011/12 and have asked local authorities to make applications .
- 3.7 It is evident that Increasing numbers of local authorities are committing to the FSA's FHRS and by the end of March 2012 it is anticipated that over 65% will be operating the scheme or preparing to launch it.
- 3.8 The FSA's long term aim is for 100% of local authorities operating the scheme and to ensure that this becomes a reality a bill is currently being drafted which could make participating in the scheme compulsory for local authorities.

4. Conclusion

- 4.1 There is evidence that the Council's 'Scores on the Doors' scheme is very popular with both customers and businesses. It has had a positive effect on

business performance and food hygiene compliance and has helped to empower consumers in making an informed choice about where to eat out.

- 4.2 The existing SOTD scheme will soon no longer be viable. If the Council wishes to continue running a successful food hygiene rating scheme then it needs to consider migrating to the FSA's National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme and apply for grant aid to assist in this process.
- 4.3 Migrating to the FSA's FHRS will enable the service to continue to promote the Council's vision of work in partnership to support strong communities and assisting individuals in taking responsibility for their health and wellbeing

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that Members:

- a. Note the content of this report on the FSA's National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme;
- b. Authorise the Head of Environmental & Community Health Services to submit an application for grant funding from the FSA with a view to migrating from the current SOTD scheme; and
- c. Authorise the Head of Environmental & Community Health Services to migrate from the existing SOTD scheme to the FSA's National Food Hygiene Rating Scheme subject to confirmation of a successful application for funding.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Food Hygiene Rating Scheme : guidance for local Authorities on implementation and operation – the 'Brand Standard'

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