

## **EXETER CITY COUNCIL**

### **SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY**

**4 MARCH 2008**

#### **FOOD HYGIENE RATING SCHEMES**

##### **(SCORES ON THE DOORS)**

## **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 This report describes food hygiene rating schemes, and outlines how this simple concept incorporates many of the aims of better regulation as well as promoting good standards of hygiene in food businesses.
- 1.2 The report seeks the introduction of a pilot scheme for Exeter in order to evaluate its merits, and determine the value of a longer-term scheme.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Food hygiene rating schemes were pioneered in the USA, and provide information to the consumer on the food hygiene score assigned to a business following a food hygiene inspection by a regulatory authority. They are often referred to as “Scores on the Doors”.
- 2.2 The new agenda for local government regulation is to improve results through efficiencies and risk-based targeted actions. The challenge facing regulatory authorities is to find innovative tools and develop appropriate partnerships to effectively and efficiently deliver services, as well as assisting businesses in compliance with regulations.
- 2.3 Rating schemes are commonplace across many industries. This is especially so in the hospitality sector where schemes such as Michelin, RAC and AA stars and more recently the Green Tourism Award seek to inform the consumer over the quality of food, the comfort of the accommodation and the environmental credentials of the business respectively. Such schemes are seen as valuable marketing tools by the businesses, which in turn strive to achieve and maintain a high-rating score.
- 2.4 There are in the region of 136 local authorities in the UK using a variety of food hygiene rating schemes. Approximately 68 of those currently use the nationally recognised service provided by Transparency Data, which is the biggest single provider.
- 2.5 Recent research conducted by Northumbria University on authorities using the service provided by Transparency Data concludes that the scheme has been directly responsible for a significant improvement in compliance with food hygiene requirements. Research on a similar food hygiene rating scheme in Los Angeles confirmed that it has been an effective tool in reducing the incidence of food poisoning.

2.6 In March 2008, The Food Standards Agency (FSA) will be recommending a suitable model standard for a food hygiene rating scheme based on the results of trials currently being conducted in a variety of councils across the country. Any scheme launched in Exeter, would conform with this standard.

### **3. PROPOSALS**

3.1 Food hygiene rating schemes work by converting the results of a food hygiene inspection, completed by the Environmental Health Officer, into a visual display such as stars. Zero stars equates to a poor food hygiene score and five stars an excellent score. This approach provides an easily understood method of informing the consumer and hence offering them the ability to use this information to make an informed choice of whether to visit the business or choose an alternative venue. Empowering the consumer is an important component of regulatory reform.

3.2 Research conducted by the FSA in the form of a large-scale business survey concluded that food safety practices are primarily driven by customer expectations, the need to avoid bad publicity and the need to secure and maintain customer confidence and business reputation. Food hygiene rating schemes tap into this very issue and the public display of food hygiene scores provides a powerful incentive to businesses to self improve and raise standards.

3.3 Such a scheme places no extra burden on the food inspection service. In fact, given the anticipated improvements in food hygiene over a period of time, it should be possible to realign the inspection service to ensure extra resources are concentrated upon the poor performing businesses. This is in accordance with the principles of better regulation.

3.4 Schemes can be implemented in the following ways:

- a. developing and administering in-house, requiring the public to access the authority's web pages and be re-routed to the appropriate site;
- b. joining an existing scheme operated by a number of local authorities;
- c. buying in to an off the peg service offered by an external provider.

3.5 Developing an in-house scheme has resource implications in terms of officer time, specialised IT input and re-configuration of the Council's existing M3 database system to allow reporting in line with proposed FSA guidance. It is likely to present future cost implications should alterations to the M3 system be required in line with new FSA guidance or legislation. For these reasons, an in-house scheme does not present itself as an attractive option when compared to the other options available.

3.6 It may be possible to join an existing scheme administered by a partnership of local authorities (eg the 'Safe2Eat' scheme operated by a number of Hampshire authorities).

3.7 The last option is for the authority to subscribe annually to an external service provider, electronically forwarding the score data to enable the scheme web pages to be updated. Such schemes offer an off-the-peg solution, which can be implemented over a short timescale.

#### **4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1 The annual revenue cost of subscribing to the service provided by an external service provider is in the region of £3,000, although it is anticipated that a pro rata fee could be negotiated for part of a year. Additional administration costs are incurred with all schemes and include the printing and posting of certificates. Whilst this will equate to approximately 500 certificates in any given year, the activity is spread throughout the year as and when food hygiene inspections are completed. These costs can be funded from within existing budgets.

#### **5. RECOMMENDED:**

that Scrutiny - Community supports:

- 1) the implementation of a pilot Food Hygiene Rating Scheme for Exeter, initially to be funded from within existing budgets;
- 2) to implement the scheme by subscription to an existing established provider with national or regional presence;
- 3) subject to the success of a pilot Exeter Food Hygiene Rating Scheme, to report back with proposals for a permanent scheme subject to funding being available.

#### **HEAD OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

S:PA/LP/ Committee/308SCC3 v4  
21.2.08

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

#### **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

#### **Background papers used in compiling this report:**

Northumbria University Scores on the Doors report (available in Members' Room)  
Impact of Restaurant Hygiene Grade Cards on Foodborne-Disease Hospitalizations in Los Angeles County (available in Members' Room)