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**INTERIM FINDINGS OF AN EVALUATION OF
THE IMPACT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF
“SCORES ON THE DOORS” FOR THE
“SCORES ON THE DOORS” USER GROUP**

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Interim evaluation prepared by

Tim Hibbert and Alistair Bulloch
School of Applied Sciences
Northumbria University
Ellison Building
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE1 8ST

SUMMARY OF INTERIM FINDINGS

THE PROJECT AIMS

The overall aims of the project are to assess the impact and effectiveness of the “Scores on the Doors” food safety initiative being undertaken by a number of local authorities, who are members of the Scores on the Doors User Group.

This summary focuses on some of the key findings that have emerged from an evaluation of the data to date. This is an interim position the full evaluation report will be published by the end of 2007.

SETTING THE SCENE

Public sector information now underpins a growing part of the economy and the amount and influence of this data is increasing at a dramatic pace. The driver to this growth is the emergence of online tools that allow people to use information in new ways.

National Statistics reported this year that nearly 15 million households in Great Britain (61%) had internet access. This is a 4 million increase of households since 2002. Even those regions with lower access levels achieved 52%. This level of access provides opportunities to offer new opportunities to solve long - standing problems.

Scores on the Doors provides a pivotal opportunity to take advantage of this important development by both improving communication and involvement with the consumer who spends a significant amount of disposal income on food.

Scores on the Doors schemes are part of an evolving movement to change the way in which consumers can make use of website information. For example, having received information about the hygiene conditions found at premises, consumers can use their judgement on how a premise is performing against the required standards of food safety when making their purchasing choices.

Similar schemes abroad claim that sharing food safety information has lead to a reduction in food borne illness. In addition they also claim that those restaurants that demonstrated an increase in compliance reaped business benefits such as improved business turnover.

We are aware that the Better Regulation Executive is also looking at ways to promote the publication of regulatory information, and the Food Standards

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Agency is undertaking a comprehensive study into various schemes using a number of pilots.

The Scores on the Doors User Group set the scope of this evaluation to focus on the views and 'good practice' of environmental health professionals operating Scores on the Doors schemes. This is intended to augment and inform individual Council considerations, food group reviews and FSA's own evaluation study, which are either in progress or planned. Colleagues were asked to comment upon the views and reactions of the general public and food businesses, however, neither of these stakeholder groups was approached directly.

CONTEXT OF EVALUATION

Northumbria University has been engaged by the Scores on the Doors User Group to evaluate two major themes:

- Effect of the scheme on compliance and
- Effect on Local Authority service efficiencies

This evaluation elicited evidence from eighteen local authorities currently involved using Scores on the Doors software. This represented 27% of authorities using this method to publish hygiene reports.

Evidence was obtained from interviews that were conducted using what is known as a "semi-structured" approach. This process was designed to elicit thoughts, opinions, views, experiences and value judgements from those most closely involved with implementing and operating this form of Scores on the Doors scheme. It is not unusual for these perspectives to be potentially both positive and negative and also to reveal any enlightening experiences and anecdotal evidence from the process.

The questions were grouped around a number of core themes, including:-

- Detail of how the service currently operates, including lines of reporting
- The planning and implementation phase of the Scores on the Doors scheme, which agencies were involved and the marketing/PR strategy
- The operation of the scheme and reaction of staff and key stakeholders – the public and food businesses
- Specific questions about the use of the scheme as a method of securing improved food hygiene standards and medium/long term sustainability
- What were identified as the key measures of success?
- If this scheme was regarded as a success, what resources and further skill development might be needed?
- What are the lessons learnt from the project?

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- The support provided by the software company, value for money and what was felt could be improved
- Finally, we sought comments on how this or similar schemes could be used to empower the consumer and the consumers influence over raising standards.

This approach does limit the scope of the evaluation; it is about actual experiences, not about arguments around the merits of particular approaches or methods.

INTERIM FINDINGS

This Interim Report makes a number of observations based on the evidence gathered from the interview process.

One of the key considerations was Why Introduce Scores on the Doors? All authorities interviewed agreed that their own scheme had achieved the following aims and objectives:

A means to enable the public to have access to food hygiene information in order for them to make informed choices about where they eat out or purchase their food.

The scheme has encouraged food businesses to be proactive in driving up food hygiene standards in their area.

Freedom of Information (FOI) requests have been received for hygiene reports relating to specific food premises in the area. The introduction of the scheme has enabled the majority of these requests to be easily addressed by directing the enquiry to the website. This gives them a representative indication of the hygiene of food premises in the Council's area.

There is a clear consensus that not only does the scheme promote consumer choice, but that customer and peer pressure have been demonstrated to act as an incentive for proprietors to improve their standards. Improved standards will mean that premises do not need to be visited so frequently, thus delivering service efficiencies.

Although the scheme has benefited good food businesses by promoting their achievement, there will always remain a number of persistent poor performers. Effective targeting of this group should improve the standards of these poor performing premises. This should increase food hygiene standards and bring down the number of food poisoning cases in the authority. At the present time there is no firm evidence base to support this observation.

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All are agreed that the scheme encourages businesses to have a self-regulatory approach to maintaining high food hygiene standards, rather than waiting for a Food Safety Officer to advise them what they need to do during their inspection visit. This will achieve good publicity for businesses that manage food safety to a high standard and ultimately increase their trade. Hence, the scheme encourages the proactive management of food safety rather than a reactive response to food hygiene interventions.

Publishing food hygiene scores will provide a degree of transparency for the inspection process and its outcomes, which currently is only available to the food business operator and enforcement authority. It also influences the inspecting officer to be open and honest about the standards found at the time of inspection and therefore will promote increased consistency of enforcement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESOURCES

Evidence shows a variable approach to the application of resources. Some authorities secured an increase in resources for the development of publicity and associated consultation activities. In other cases a minimalist approach was taken with no extra staff or resources being made available. Some authorities published no historical inspection information instead relying upon the award being made as the premises were assessed during their next scheduled food hygiene inspection in accordance with the FSA code of practice. In the latter approach there was little or no direct consultation apart from synergy with other promotion initiatives, for example Safer Food Better Business (SFBB).

All authorities recognised that the cost of the appointing an external service provider to supply a web portal to contain the information was generally met from within the existing budget provision. All also felt that existing Information Technology resources within their authority could not deliver and sustain such a service effectively.

The common approach was to make it clear to businesses that the score awarded represented conditions found at the time of the inspection, and that the score could not be changed until the next inspection was due. This was an important staffing issue so removing the pressure on officers to adjust the score in the interim period or to carry out extra follow up visits. This approach, in a small number of instances, has caused some difficulties with food businesses and in limited circumstances generated adverse publicity, but all authorities were able to resolve such problems by taking a pragmatic approach to the issue.

All authorities reported that dealing with the media created its own dynamics. What became clear from the evidence is that the profile of food hygiene and the environmental health service has reached an unprecedented level of exposure. In all cases the requests for service on the Councils web sites have exceeded all expectations.

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There is also clear evidence that the issue of media attention needs to be worked upon to maintain the public profile. To maintain public interest in food hygiene demands innovative thinking and constant refreshing of the message. Opportunities such as the introduction of making access available via mobile phones and other events and publicity materials could be exploited to maintain public and media interest.

Many respondents cited concerns over lack of continuing media interest. Many felt that this could perhaps be addressed by resources and support from the corporate centre. It was generally agreed that to maintain an effective media strategy, resources needed to be made available on a regional or national basis.

STAFFING ISSUES

It goes without saying that with anything new there is always a certain degree of uncertainty and uneasiness and this was reflected in the responses we received from both front line staff and management.

Issues that were cited included doubts over consistency of scoring premises by officers, fears of legal challenges to awards, and uneasiness regarding new roles such as providing consultancy and coaching services for food businesses. Fears were also raised of the consequences of increased transparency and accountability attached to the inspection process, and the potential for challenge and confrontation from food businesses and the perennial concerns over increased workloads.

The good news is that most of these fears and concerns have proved to be unfounded as the schemes have developed in practice. Even the sceptics amongst the staff in the authorities in the study have generally had their views turned round.

The reasons behind this change of hearts and minds include the fact there were no apparent major issues regarding consistency between colleagues at an authority level or between authorities where joint schemes were implemented. Several authorities even cited implementing the scheme as a valuable self appraisal process allowing more realistic assessments of premises and hygiene standards to be undertaken. The experience of discussing the rating process with colleagues, both internally and externally, was also regularly cited as a valuable mutual reassurance of consistency for front line staff.

The legal challenge predicted in certain quarters has failed to materialise to such an extent that none of the authorities included in this evaluation have had anything approaching such an experience. The Information Commissioner has given advice to local authorities that the presumption should be in favour of

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disclosure of such information as there is a strong public interest case and because "it gives the public valuable knowledge when making choices about where to eat out".

The evidence has also highlighted the feel good factor experienced by officers who have been involved with a novel and innovative new approach to improving food safety. This has led to staff in some authorities developing a real passion for the approach which is in sharp relief to what many see as the dull, repetitive and largely unsuccessful methods employed previously.

New and evolving roles, working in partnership with businesses, often more in common with a consultancy rather than enforcement approaches, have also been a common positive experience. While this was always a role that most officers and authorities have long recognised, Scores on the Doors schemes have in many authorities brought this to the fore in a very positive manner appreciated by both officers and food businesses.

ADMINISTRATION

Nobody likes unwelcome and unforeseen surprises. The same is true when you expose the results of your innermost enforcement workings and administrative processes to the scrutiny of the public and the press. This, in effect, is what happens when you go live by publishing food hygiene inspection awards on the internet. It therefore pays to be confident in your data and systems. The quality of inspection data and systems is consequently key to success. This was a viewpoint strongly shared by virtually all respondents in our study.

Many authorities had illuminating tales to tell. One authority experienced apparent zero awards being seized upon by the local press, when in fact the premises had merely been assigned a score equating to a zero award as an administrative convenience, to ensure that new businesses would quickly appear in inspection schedules. Luckily this was quickly rectified with minimum repercussion. Others cited issues with unhappy food businesses who had recently taken over poor performing businesses and felt they were saddled with the consequences of others actions or failings.

Many authorities pointed out that a carefully balanced decision had to be taken regarding how much data would be made available to the public from the start of the scheme. There was no clear consensus on this issue. All authorities, however, agreed that the impact on administrative resources of implementing and operating the scheme was negligible.

INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

The use of the Internet has become widespread, impacting on consumers in diverse ways. This interim report argues that the Food Standards Agency could now grasp the opportunities that are emerging to square the compliance triangle and acknowledge that the consumer can be a powerful agent in meeting the objectives of the Agency, the Better Regulation Executive and Local Authorities.

It is a fact that a momentum has built up over this issue. A significant proportion of local authorities have already begun publishing food hygiene inspection information and many more are either in the process of implementing schemes or are actively considering it. Scores on the Doors schemes are now a reality and will therefore, at some point, become an expectation of consumers.

All those who took part in this study agreed that such schemes help remove the mystery from the enforcement function. They were effective methods and that they had a long term future as one of the various approaches available to environmental health professionals to improve standards of food hygiene in businesses.

Publishing food hygiene information and the media attention it has attracted has, in many cases, led to unprecedented exposure for the environmental health profession. This time in the limelight should be grasped and exploited by the profession to positively raise its profile in the eyes of the public and the government.

These are dynamic times for food safety and the wider profession as a whole and initiatives such as Scores on the Doors fit neatly with and address many of the challenges that are faced by enforcement authorities and professionals. Improvements achieved through publishing food hygiene information and harnessing the power of consumers can then create headspace for resources to be focussed where it really matters – food businesses with poor hygiene performance.

The work of the Scores on the Doors User Group has been an excellent example of individuals and authorities working together to deliver on effective and innovative new approaches in environmental health. It has clearly demonstrated the potential and benefits of strong networks and may have the potential to develop new and innovative ways of harnessing consumer influence.

The final and arguably strongest message to emerge from the study was the demand for a national approach to be taken in the publishing of food hygiene information. All participants in the study felt that there should be such a national scheme and that there was a need for a clear national direction to be set by the Food Standards Agency.

The Evaluation Team

Mr Timothy Hibbert led the team with Mr Alistair Bulloch.

Mr Timothy Hibbert, Visiting Fellow: Tim Hibbert is a former Director of Environmental Health at Newcastle City Council who has been active member of the profession at national and regional level for many years. He has been instrumental in the development and delivery of the BSc Environmental Health programme at Northumbria and has worked with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) to develop their national professional qualifications framework. He is both a professional examiner and assessor for CIEH.

Mr Alistair Bulloch, Senior Lecturer: Alistair Bulloch is a qualified Environmental Health Officer and Health and Safety Professional who worked for a number of years in local government enforcement and the private sector before entering academia. His current academic interests relate particularly to the management of health and safety. He is published in the area of risk management and health and safety enforcement, as well as until recently being an external examiner for the Institute of Risk Management. He has also recently completed a Master of Science degree in Management Research at the University of Glasgow.

If you would like to contact either Tim or Alistair their details are below

Mr Timothy Hibbert
Visiting Fellow
School of Applied Sciences
Northumbria University
NE1 8ST
timothy.hibbert@unn.ac.uk

Mr Alistair Bulloch
Senior Lecturer
School of Applied Sciences
Northumbria University
NE1 8ST
0191 243 7571
alistair.bulloch@unn.ac.uk

The University and School

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The School is dedicated to education and research within its five subject divisions, **Biological and Food Sciences - Biomedical Sciences - Chemical and Forensic Sciences - Environmental Management - Geography** which have exciting and extensive portfolios of undergraduate programmes, including a recently approved BSc Environmental Health programme, together with postgraduate studies leading to higher degrees. There is also a wide range of consultancy expertise within the School and the indispensable links with public and private sector organisations create added value to our programmes.

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The final evaluation will be published in December 2007. If you would like to receive a copy please either write or email to us at the address above.

APPENDIX
CIEH Best of the Best – back to basics Conference
Presentation Slides