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## The Consumer Council

Elizabeth House  
116 Holywood Road  
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1 December 2014

Dr Kathryn Aiken  
Clerk  
Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety  
Room 284, Parliament Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

Dear Kathryn

### **The Food Hygiene Rating Bill**

The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI) have a duty to represent consumers' needs and concerns and this is underpinned by our mission statement '*making the consumer voice heard and making it count*'.

As part of our statutory remit, CCNI promotes and safeguards the interests of consumers in relation to energy, water, transport and food. Recognising the role of the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland, our strategic focus on food centres on food prices; particularly in light of the rising cost of living and also consumers' experience of food shopping. We are therefore interested in and supportive of the Bill as we believe this will greatly assist and improve consumers' confidence and decision-making in relation to eating out or buying food in.

In March 2013 the Consumer Council responded to the FSA's public consultation to assess the impact of mandatory display of food hygiene ratings



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in NI. We used the 7 Consumer Principles<sup>1</sup> to guide our response, which supported the mandatory display of ratings stickers. This submission uses the Principles approach again and applies them to the following clauses contained in the Bill.

### **Clause 7 Duty to Display a Rating**

Clause 7(1) provides a duty on the operator of a food business to ensure that a valid food hygiene ratings sticker is displayed. Elsewhere in the Bill (Clause 10) creates a number of offences which include failure to display, intentionally altering, defacing or tampering with a sticker.

These duties fit with the Principles of:

**Information:** The mandatory use of rating stickers, which must be displayed prominently in all food establishments, will provide consumers with reliable information about the hygiene standards in place. This is information that a consumer would otherwise be unlikely to have access to.

Another advantage of the proposed mandatory display of rating stickers is the expected increase in consumers' familiarity with the scheme, helping it to become a trusted tool which will help consumers shop around<sup>2</sup>.

**Choice:** The scheme will provide consumers with information they need to make an informed choice about where to eat out or purchase food.

**Safety:** There is a clear link to safety and indeed the Bill's primary aim is to reduce the incidence of foodborne illness.

### **Clause 8 Duty to provide information about rating**

Clause 8 (1) requires the operator of a food business or a 'relevant employee' to orally inform a person of the food hygiene rating when requested.

**Access:** The provision made in this Duty ensures that the information is accessible to consumers who are unable to see the ratings sticker i.e. blind or partially sighted people or people making a telephone booking or order.

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<sup>1</sup> The 7 Consumer Principles were first established in the 1970s and allow public and private sector bodies to assess how consumer focussed a service or initiative is. The 7 Principles (sometimes referred to as Tests) are: Information/ Access / Redress / Representation / Fairness / Choice / Safety.

<sup>2</sup> CCNI are heartened to learn that research has shown NI consumers to have higher levels of recognition of the scheme than in England and Wales, but share the concern that consumers did not notice where ratings were not displayed as part of an observation exercise they were asked to complete.

**Fairness:** The above Duty by its nature also fits with the Principle of fairness, ensuring that all consumers are able to make use of the food hygiene rating information.

**Other comments:**

How and where the rating is displayed will directly impact on the scheme's visibility and usefulness to consumers. In addition to displaying the rating sticker on site and having the rating available for checking on the FSA website; CCNI would also support any moves to instruct food establishments to display their rating prominently on their own company website where applicable.

In terms of increasing the scheme's impact, we also support the view of consumers participating in the Citizen's Forum<sup>3</sup> that for the scheme to be even more effective, there must be a public information campaign.

Finally, CCNI welcomes the definition "food business establishment" used in the Bill as this will provide flexibility in the future to widen the scheme to include business to business trade. It seems fair that a business striving for a high rating in food hygiene should have the ability to check a supplier's rating; and we will watch with interest the developments taking place in Wales where the scheme has been extended to include food producers and wholesalers.

According to research conducted on behalf of the Consumer Council following the horsemeat scandal in February 2013<sup>4</sup>, NI consumers in general were found to have a favourable view of local farmers, producers and processors. CCNI feel that applying the rating scheme to other food establishments will succeed in driving up standards further and increasing consumer confidence in our local agri-food sector.

Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



**AODHAN O'DONNELL**  
Interim Chief Executive

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<sup>3</sup> Four consumer panels independently conducted across NI in February 2013

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.consumerCouncil.org.uk/publications/--food-supply-chain-issues-and-the-horsemeat-scandal---the-consumer-view---/>

