

Rewarding food businesses that promote healthier and sustainable eating: Lessons learned from the Bristol Eating Better Award evaluation

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About the research

An [increasing number](#) of people of all ages consume their meals outside the home. Meals eaten 'out-of-home' are often high in energy, fat, sugar and salt and [contribute to obesity](#). Several governmental reports and guidelines have outlined the importance of [supporting opportunities for communities to access a wide range of healthier food products](#), [catering guidance that offers practical advice on how to make catering affordable, healthier and more sustainable](#) and [working with local out-of-home environments to provide healthier choices](#). As a result, many local authorities are launching [voluntary healthy catering award schemes](#) and are working with food venues, as part of a complex system, to promote healthier out-of-home environments. Public Health England has recently published a [toolkit](#) to encourage more local interventions and support Councils working with local businesses to provide healthier foods and drinks to consumers. However, few such initiatives promote environmentally-friendly practices in addition to healthier eating, or achieve sufficient uptake to impact on population health.

Drawing on co-produced research from the [Centre for Exercise, Nutrition & Health Sciences \(ENHS\)](#) and [Bristol City Council's Public Health](#) team, this report highlights findings and policy implications from the evaluation of the [Bristol Eating Better Award \(BEBA\) scheme](#). Our evidence-based recommendations can be used to support local authorities (environmental health, trading standards, sustainability and public health teams) throughout the United Kingdom that are planning, developing, or currently delivering such schemes to encourage food business participation to provide healthier and more sustainable food for consumers.

About the Bristol Eating Better Award (BEBA) scheme

- [BEBA](#) is a free voluntary scheme encouraging food businesses to offer healthier and more environmentally-friendly foods to Bristol's citizens.
- BEBA aims to make [food better for people, places and the planet](#), with the long-term aim of tackling obesity and protecting the environment.
- Any food business with a food hygiene rating score of 4 or above and registered with Bristol City Council can apply for the award.
- Businesses meeting a certain number of award criteria receive an award, and can display the BEBA's [logo](#) in their venue's window to help customers identify healthy and sustainable food venues.



How the evidence informs policy and practice

The popularity of award schemes that promote a healthier food provision by out-of-home establishments is [increasing](#). Award schemes promoting healthier and more sustainable food should incorporate food businesses' views from the beginning to enhance engagement with the scheme and implementation of changes. Our evidence provides important insights for planning and delivering such award schemes.



1. Rewarding good practice is important, but award schemes should target those businesses most in need of change

Of the 32 businesses participating in the evaluation, 97% achieved either a gold-level or a silver-level award. Businesses, on average, made eight new commitments to change. New changes tended to be easy to implement, such as rearranging displays or providing more choice to customers. Award-holding food venue owners reported that they had participated in the BEBA to obtain official recognition for the steps that they had already taken towards providing healthier and more sustainable food, rather than viewing the award as something to achieve by committing to additional changes. This suggests that BEBA was engaged with by businesses that needed to change least and appeared to prompt a limited number of new actions to improve the provision of healthy and sustainable food.

Policy implications

- Award schemes promoting healthier and more sustainable food provision hold potential for recognising existing areas of good practice, which is important for maintenance of achievements and highlighting businesses with good practice to the public.
- Local authorities should engage particularly with food businesses based in areas of high health risk early on in the process of planning award schemes, as an important strategy to enhance uptake of such schemes by businesses that need to change the most.

“... it's a bit like preaching to the converted. How do you get people who really could benefit from following some of this to actually go... “yeah, I'll give it a go?”.”

Owner of award-holding venue

2. The online award system and logo should be adapted to appeal to the businesses most in need of change

Overall, award-holding food venue owners thought the application to the scheme was easy to complete but offered several suggestions to improve the online award system. However, award holders felt that businesses with more changes to make may find the length, scope and number of criteria in the application overwhelming. Award holders thought that having award categories (bronze, silver, gold) might not appeal to businesses with more changes to make and that the award's [logo](#) (an apple) does not necessarily illustrate other important aspects of the scheme, such as sustainability, waste and supporting the local economy. The application could also benefit from providing guidance and tips on how to achieve change against each criterion and generating a downloadable list of the commitments made, with practical tips and resources on how to implement these changes.

Case study

Based on these findings, Bristol City Council has shortened the [BEBA scheme application](#) and has revised the award's [logo](#) to illustrate all aspects of the scheme. The award is now based on 50% of the actions being mandatory for bronze (as long as they are applicable to the business); a business meeting at least 75% and 90% of the applicable actions will receive a silver and gold award, respectively. Space is also provided in the online award system for businesses to optionally explain their decision-making.





3. Award schemes should help businesses tackle barriers regarding change in food provision

Award-holding food venue owners faced challenges when deciding whether to commit to, or trying to make, changes based on the scheme's criteria. Challenges included the financial costs associated with the changes; lack of clarity and guidance on how to make the suggested changes; and concerns over their customers' reactions to any changes.

Policy implications

- Bespoke training and guidance are needed, for both suppliers and vendors, to support businesses in making low-risk and cost-efficient changes to their food provision. Working within the supply chain to change food provision whilst protecting profits would be paramount for the impact of award schemes on health.
- Networking opportunities for award-holding businesses, e.g. through a national support network, should be included in the planning of award schemes to help award-holders connect and support each other, share ideas and problem-solve. These could be in the form of newsletters or a minimal-resource Facebook group.

4. Award-holding businesses should be promoted to increase the prestige of award schemes

Overall, award-holding food venue owners perceived that their customers were not aware of their business' participation in the scheme and, as they already held an award, they felt that awareness of the scheme would not make a difference to their existing customers. This was confirmed by our customer survey of award-holding venues; 76% of customers surveyed did not know that the venue they were visiting held an award and 61% reported that the award made no difference to how likely they were to revisit the venue. However, 89% were supportive of other businesses joining the scheme. Food venue owners also felt there were not many benefits to participating in the award scheme, other than being recognised for the work they were already doing, and thought that greater publicity of award holders would raise the scheme's prestige.

Policy implication

- Local authorities planning award schemes should invest in promotion activities, for example by prominently featuring award-holding venues on their websites and social media and promoting via local travel guides and food festivals.

“ ‘...the bottom line... you've got to be able to run a business that makes a profit, and if you're being asked to pay five times the cost of packaging, you'd have to put your prices up quite a lot and you know it's really tough.’

Owner of award-holding venue



“ ‘... a lot of businesses would give their right arm for some great promotion... so if you have a score of 80% or higher, be registered on our recommended list of cafes, restaurants to go to in Bristol... let the people of Bristol know.. get them talking to the people that own businesses that might want to be doing it.’

Owner of award-holding venue

Overall recommendations

- Award schemes can reward food venues for their good practices but are likely taken up by businesses with few changes to make. Appropriate promotion of award-holding businesses could be used to raise the prestige of such schemes.
- Online award systems, logos and scoring criteria should be adapted to appeal to businesses, particularly those in high risk areas that will likely have more changes to make. Guidance and practical tips on how to implement changes that are committed to should be provided.
- Greater investment in supporting change over time in the whole supply chain system will be required to help businesses offer healthier and more sustainable food, while maintaining profits and remaining appealing to customers.
- Evaluation of award schemes should involve all businesses, regardless of participation in the scheme. Only then will we be able to assess the effect of such schemes on the out-of-home food environment - and their ability to tackle practices which contribute to obesity - the schemes' ultimate goal.



Top 5 changes committed to by businesses

- All staff have read the Eat Well Guide and are able to explain & promote healthier options
- We identify all products/ dishes that are 'low' sugar
- We display sugar content against items which are 'high' in sugar
- We are breastfeeding friendly and have signs up reflecting this
- We try to buy food that only uses sustainably sourced palm oil

Further information

The Bristol Eating Better Award scheme has been developed by, and belongs to Public Health Division, Bristol City Council, which commissioned and funded [ENHS](#) to conduct the scheme's evaluation (01/03/2018-01/12/2018).

More information on the Bristol Eating Better Award scheme can be found at: <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/food-business/bristol-eating-better-award-scheme>

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