



FRC Food Policy Guidance Note

Getting engaged: How to help convenience stores sell healthier food

Purpose of this Guidance Note

This Guidance Note aims to help public health and local food practitioners who want to engage with convenience store owners to boost the supply of healthier foods, especially in places where healthy options may be hard to obtain. It is based on a longer FRC Evidence Review '[Engaging with convenience stores for healthier food provision: what works?](#)'.

Why this matters

It is increasingly clear that 'food retail environments' – the places where people buy food – have an important influence on diet. In the UK, convenience stores play an important part in the food retail environment. They are often found at the centre of communities and in areas with few other food shops, which makes them convenient for everyone and essential for those with limited mobility due to age, disability or income. Unfortunately, however, they are not often associated with healthy food provision.

Evidence shows that well planned and adequately resourced interventions by public health workers targeted at convenience stores can help make food retail environments healthier. Numerous examples over the past 20 years have tried to boost the *supply* of healthy foods by helping convenience store retailers understand how to manage and profit from foods in this category, and have tried to boost *demand* by enhancing awareness of what comprises a healthy diet and by publicising the availability of healthy foods at convenience stores.

Effective engagement is the key to success. By this we mean the ways in which retailers are approached, encouraged and supported to provide healthier

options in their stores (which may mean changing the way they have done business for many years); and the processes by which retailers are motivated to join and remain committed to the initiatives. We have recently conducted research on 'what works and why' to help practitioners engage with convenience store operators to improve access to healthy diets. These are our findings and recommendations.

Key findings from the research

- Establishing trusting relationships between programme staff and retailers is key to effective engagement.
- Retailers are more likely to engage if health goals align with business goals.
- Programme staff are more likely to succeed if they approach stores via known and trusted channels (such as trade associations) and demonstrate understanding of the convenience retail sector.
- A strong 'business case' boosts engagement and strengthens it over time: it is important to show how participation can increase profits and help retailers keep up with consumer trends.
- Minimising work and keeping things free and simple for the shop owner increases the likelihood of engagement.
- Adapting the programme to each shop's needs helps retain engagement.
- Strengthening bonds between retailers and their communities boosts reputation and helps cement engagement.

Recommendations for effective engagement

1. Select participants carefully

Retailers are more likely to join initiatives if they hear about them through channels they already know and trust, and if they already show some interest in health trends – or in keeping abreast of these for business reasons.

- Enlist trade associations, symbol groups and other industry connections to help identify and recruit retailers to the programme.
- Advertise your initiative through channels that are familiar to retailers, such as cash-and-carry wholesalers, trade association events, trade publications, social media and word of mouth.
- Select retailers who are already involved with their communities, e.g. through charitable work or links with schools, or who have awareness or interest in healthy lifestyles.
- Consider store location: is it the only shop in the area, or on a school route? These factors may help you identify important stores to recruit.

“So [be] very personal, very patient, very understanding. Because I’ve worked with so many independent retailers, I know the challenges they have. I understand their frustrations and I also know their priorities. So playing to all of those things means that eventually they were prepared to listen to what they saw initially as yet another council project. But they did after our intervention realise that there was a commercial value to them in taking part”
(Healthy food initiative, programme staff).

2. Structure programmes for ease, make them flexible and agree goals

Programmes are much more likely to succeed if the practitioners understand the convenience retail sector, and appreciate that retailers have little spare time and will need practical help with implementation.

- Recruit practitioners with experience of the sector to conduct the programme: partner with an established trade association or consultant, or employ people with a retail background.
- Engage enough staff to carry out the practicalities of implementation on behalf of the retailers.
- Ensure programmes are flexible enough not to be intimidating, with stages or levels that the retailer can work through over a certain period.
- Agree goals and outcomes with retailers from the outset, giving them a stake in the programme.

3. Keep programmes realistic, relatable and free

Practitioners implementing the programmes need to be aware of the realities facing convenience store operators (e.g. competition issues, resource constraints, the personal nature of the business).

- Tailor programme strategies to accommodate the retailers’ individual concerns and needs.
- Employ practitioners who speak the retailers’ language and use terminology the retailers can relate to.
- Retailers are more likely to engage if materials, support and advice are free.
- Remain open to discussion on retailers’ attitudes and beliefs around health, and offer the initiative as a trial to pique interest in participation.

“Basically, [the key thing is] building rapport with the retailers. And having a worthwhile proposition that you’re going to work with them, you’re not there to sell them something, you’re not there to dictate to them”
(Healthy food initiative, programme staff).

4. Make the business case for involvement

Programmes must convey to retailers that taking part will have economic benefits for them, as well as health or other benefits for their communities.

- Share evidence from established programmes of sales growth or customer retention, or use recommendations from shops already involved.
- Assess shop’s goals and challenges in order to tailor the pitch to their needs (do they need better promotion? Better sales? More customers? New income streams? New equipment?).
- Discuss pending health legislation or upcoming health trends and show how the programme can help set the retailer up to benefit from these changes.
- Talk about how the programme can help the retailers better understand the health profile of the foods they stock.
- Highlight unique ways convenience stores can have a competitive edge over supermarkets when it comes to creating a healthy community (e.g., by being located closer to customers, being the only shop accessible to customers with mobility issues, and being a familiar and trusted community presence).

5. Build lasting relationships

Building long-term, trusting relationships between programme staff and retailers is the essence of effective engagement. It helps retailers to move into unfamiliar territory, in terms of stock and approaches; it allows programme staff to have confidence that retailers will maintain momentum; and over time it allows commercial benefits to become evident and the reputation of businesses and the programme to grow.

- Establish and nurture personal relationships between programme participants and staff.
- Ensure that retailers feel they are valued and respected participants in a worthwhile public health initiative.
- Plan strategies and funding for a long enough timeframe.
- Build community ties into the programme: design events at schools or support participation in local events.
- Use award schemes or media campaigns to spread community recognition of retailers’ efforts.

“Volume-wise, [convenience stores] don’t come onto the radar of regular visits by the wholesalers who they get their stock from. So I am probably the only person who they will get to hear apart from the reps of their suppliers, and that’s why they listen”
(Healthy food initiative, programme staff).

What we did

The Food Research Collaboration (FRC) brings together academics and civil society organisations to improve food policy in the United Kingdom. Working with the civil society network Sustainable Food Cities, we identified a need for information and guidance to help local food and health practitioners to engage with convenience store owners to boost healthy food provision. We reviewed a range of documentary evidence on the topic, and then conducted interviews with retailers and practitioners involved in three different healthy eating initiatives targeting convenience stores, two in London and one in Scotland. For further details on the project and its findings read the [Evidence Review](#).



**FOOD RESEARCH
COLLABORATION**

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Educating, researching & influencing
for integrated and inclusive food policy

The Food Research Collaboration is an initiative of the [Centre for Food Policy](#), City, University of London, facilitating joint working between academics and civil society organisations to improve the UK food system.

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