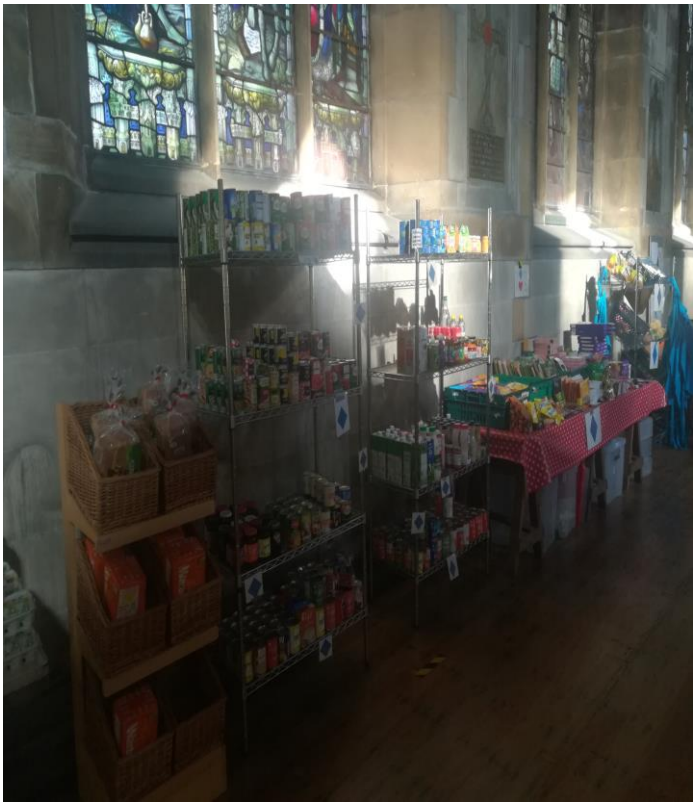

# AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A LOCAL FOOD PANTRY: A REPORT

'The question is not why this brief paradise of mutual aid and altruism appears but rather why it is ordinarily overwhelmed by another world order – not eradicated, for it never ceases to exist quietly, but we miss it at the best of times, most of us, and feel bleak or lonely for its lack' (Solnit, 2009, p.97).

Dr. Wendy Coxshall

September 2024

## Contents

## Glossary

CAoP Church Action on Poverty

NLP – Northern Local Pantry on which this research report is based.

SHHA – Stockport Homes Housing Association

SHYLP – Stockport Homes Your Local Pantry

YLP – Your Local Pantry Network (Church Action on Poverty)

## Preface

The research for this report was approved of the Social Science Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool Hope University where the author, Wendy Coxshall, is employed as a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences (Social Work). The project was also approved by the founder-members and other members of the 'Northern Local Pantry' (NLP) and Feeding Liverpool Food Alliance with which the NLP is affiliated.

This research was an ethnographic project and involved the researcher engaging in participant-observation during the NLP's weekly opening hours for several months. The researcher recorded her observations and conversations with volunteers and non-volunteer members in her fieldnotes after each pantry visit. Every effort was made by the researcher to remind and make members aware of her role as a researcher during these visits as well as to seek individual members' consent to participate in the research before striking up research conversations at the pantry. Members who expressed an interest in the project were also invited to participate in individual interviews in a public venue outside the pantry. These interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder or the researcher made handwritten interview notes. The author's fieldnotes and interview recordings provided the empirical evidence for this report. Members' identities and the name and place where the pantry is located have been anonymised for confidentiality to protect the individual rights to privacy. Although the report is based on empirical evidence that the author systematically gathered and recorded, the report findings, analysis and conclusions are based on the author's interpretation of this evidence. In this respect, the report is partial and subjective. It has also been written in appreciation of the members and in recognition of the pantry's significance in the ongoing climate, care and 'cost of living' and crises.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all members of the 'Northern Local Pantry', the women who set it up and the church for allowing me to carry out this research and to regularly visit the pantry over many months. I am immensely grateful, as well, to all those pantry members who consented to talk to me about their experiences of the pantry, and 'food' and the meaning of both in their lives. I would like to thank Feeding Liverpool Food Alliance for their support for this research project and to members of the church and Parish Church Council where the pantry operates, and who have been widely supportive and also participated in this research project as pantry members. Without their continued generosity, patience, kindness, and support this research would not have been possible. For that, I remain deeply grateful. I have learned so much from everyone and it is both a pleasure and a privilege for me to share the findings of this research with all members of the NLP. I hope that this report proves to be a useful document to you, and celebrates the immense work and wealth of knowledge, insights, and experiences among you about 'food', how to live well in the face of the ongoing crises, and create a 'community' full of vibrancy, care and respect for others and the living world.

## Executive Summary

This research report is based on a nine-month ethnography of a local food pantry in a Gold 'Eco Church' in Northern England, which will be referred to as the 'Northern Local Pantry' (NLP) from now onwards. It presents the views and experiences of the pantry 'members', who set up, run, and visit the NLP. It provides a 'thick description'[1] of 'pantry life' based on the researcher's observations and conversations with members during the pantry's weekly opening times, and semi-structured and open-ended interviews with individual members at an agreed public venue, outside the pantry.

The aim of this research project was to explore and analyse the role of food pantries in promoting food security and alternative, 'sustainable' food systems, and the responses of women and families, in particular, to increasing food insecurity in Britain in the Covid-19 'recovery', 'cost-of-living' crisis, and accelerating climate and biodiversity catastrophe.

Drawing on Barthes' ([1961] in Counihan and Van Esterik, 2008) theories about 'food' as a human communication system, the report explores the meanings implied by 'food' and the ways it is presented, served, and consumed in different 'food' spaces in the pantry. 'Foods', it is argued, are both 'signs' in a semiological system of communication, and 'signifiers' with implied meanings. 'Food' also creates specific 'social situations', like a 'business lunch' (discussed by Barthes, 1961), which imply specific sets of social and cultural practices, relations, and behaviours. Different social situations or social 'food' spaces exist and are created by and through the uses of 'food' in specific areas in the pantry such as the pantry 'shop' and 'café' area. Each of these 'food' spaces implies a particular set of social and cultural practices, relations and behaviours. These practices, relations and behaviours, the report shows, are also based on ideas of 'hospitality' and 'service', as well as commodity and gift exchanges, including mutual aid.

The report highlights the value of food pantries as spaces that can create 'social situations' through 'food' - and by the uses made of 'food' – which foster the development of mutual

[1] 'Thick description' is the term Clifford Geertz borrowed from Ryle and used in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973). In the essay 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' Geertz shows how the ethnographer can bring to life this social activity by using 'thick description' and details, as a method, and thereby also interpret the wider symbolism and underlying meanings of Balinese society. Geertz believed ethnography was about reading and interpreting 'cultures' like a manuscript filled with semiotic symbols that the ethnographer could interpret through 'thick description' and intellectual analysis.

aid among pantry members. Mutual aid is based on core values - reciprocity, shared humanity and community-driven care – and the redistribution of resources (see Littman et al., 2022). Mutual aid relations, the report shows, emerged within and across distinct 'social situations' ('food spaces') in the pantry, especially in the 'café' and spilled over into community life, outside the pantry and its weekly opening hours. Mutual aid and mutuality permeated the social relations, practices, behaviours of pantry members created by 'food' and its uses in the pantry. Clothing (and to a lesser extent housing) also contributed to the creation of social situations/spaces in the pantry, which resonates with Barthes' assertion that clothing and housing are cultural 'objects' that operate in similar ways to 'food' as both 'signs' and 'signifiers' with implicit meanings in semiological communication systems. The report suggests that the pantry serves as a communication exchange hub of 'food signs' and 'signifiers', and mutual aid exchanges through which community and community relations are created, strengthened, and renewed.

This report also provides an empirical example of mutual aid in the Covid-19 'recovery' and emphasises the strong sense of 'community', belonging, and wellbeing that pantry members (volunteers and non-volunteers) widely reported and the positive effects that participating in pantry life had for alleviating feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and social isolation.

The report emphasises the UK economy's reliance the global import/export market and highlights the limitations of food pantries, which depend on 'food surplus' produced by the global food system, while recognising that redistribution of 'food surplus' in food pantries reduces 'food waste' and landfill, which are polluting and destroying the planet. In this sense, it also highlights the limitations as well as the capabilities of food pantries to promote 'choice', 'dignity' and 'food security'. Months of high inflation and interest rates and steep increases in food and fuel prices are leading to food shortages in supply chains and dwindling amounts of 'food surplus' and food donations. This is pressuring pantries and foodbanks, alike, to 'buy in' food to maintain a consistent supply, availability, and access to affordable 'good' (nutritious and adequate) food week-on-week for local members. In this sense, the report highlights how food pantries and foodbanks are both subject to market forces, the UK economy and global food supply chains, which limit their capacity and 'capabilities' to promote the systemic change needed to replace the 'unsustainable' and polluting global food system that is destroying the planet.

Notwithstanding, the report argues that food pantries promote members' capabilities through regular access, availability and choice of affordable 'food', which includes (supermarket) 'food surplus' and 'good food' ('nutritious', 'adequate') from 'local', 'organic', and 'sustainably' grown and produced sources. These also include mutual aid contributions of fresh local fruit and vegetables from members' allotments, and seed sharing. Allotments, the report contends, are important for local access and control over land and its uses, including the 'sustainable' production, distribution, and exchange of 'good food' through mutual aid practices that promote food security, dignity, wellbeing, and community solidarity.

## 1. ‘Food security’: a social policy construct

‘Food security’ was first officially defined in 1974 as a policy concept in the international political economy by States to ensure ‘price stabilisation’ of basic foods in the context of the distribution of resources in response to the Sahelian famine at that time and which was treated as a technocratic exercise. Food security was linked to productivity, harvest yields, and starvation and defined in the following terms:

> ‘Food security is the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices’ (United Nations 1975 cited in FAO 2003 cited in Patel, 2009, p.664).

Later, a more expansive definition of food security was agreed at the 1996 UN World Food Summit,

> ‘Food security [is] a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life’ (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2001 cited in Patel, 2009, p.664).

From this, four dimensions of ‘food security’ were identified: food availability, food access, food use and the stability of the previous three dimensions over time. This definition remains the predominant way food security has since been defined.

However, around the same time as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) expanded the definition of ‘food security’, decision making around hunger policy, food production and consumption priorities was removed from the very institutions that focused on food security and ‘given to the market’ (Patel, 2009) based on capital and profit. As a result,

> ‘The development of ‘food security’ as a policy concept is one in which capital is dominant – ‘food security’ moved from being simply about producing and distributing food, to a whole nexus of concerns around nutrition, social control, and public health’ (Patel, 2009, p.664-5).

This report argues that the market-based definition of 'food security' continues to shape contemporary organisational and policy responses to poverty and 'food insecurity' in Britain and that this reproduces the mistaken idea that food provision and consumption are somehow *un*related to the politics of food production – how food is produced, by whom, for whose benefit and at whose expense.

*'Household Food Insecurity'*

> 'According to the Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP) Households Below Average Income survey, in 2021/22, 4.7 million people (7%) in the UK were in food insecure households. Among the 11.0 million people found to be in relative poverty, 15% were in food insecure households, including 21% of children. People in relative poverty live in a household with income less than 60% of the contemporary median income'.
>
> 'A YouGov survey by the Food Foundation, a food poverty charity, found that in June 2023, 17.0% of households in the UK were 'food insecure' (ate less or went a day without eating because they couldn't access or afford food), up from 8.8% in January 2022 and 7.4% in January 2021' (Francis-Devine, Malik, and Danechi, 2023).

The statements above were taken from a House of Commons Research Briefing on 'Food poverty: Households, food banks and free school meals', published on 24th August 2023. They indicate not only the extent of 'food insecurity' in Britain, today, but also demonstrate the way food insecurity is analysed and measured at the level of the 'household'. The 'household' model that is usually used, assumes that household membership is fixed, stable and is also based on the 'nuclear' family. Defining 'household' in this way, prevents the possibility of taking account of the variations, changes, and complexities of 'households' in terms of their composition, living arrangements, mobilities, internal dynamics, and relations with other households, and how these also change over time. Household changes may occur, for example, due to the seasonal migration of some household members for work or to study. Others might be absent members, such as refugees who have fled wars, persecution, and climate-related 'disasters' leaving behind other household members and relatives. Households might also be shared residences, include multiple generations, and comprise of kin and non-kin, who may be friends or 'relative' strangers.

This report will reveal the complexities of household and family relations by highlighting how neighbours and friends collaborated through voluntary acts of kindness, care, and altruism to support each other and particular members with specific emotional, practical and nutritional needs. These voluntary acts are examples of mutual aid, which the report argues play a significant role in enhancing the capabilities of pantry/community members to achieve 'food security'.

## 1b. The Capability Approach: poverty, human development, and wellbeing

The Capability Approach (CA), developed by the economist Amartya Sen in the 1980s, is about human development and wellbeing (welfare economics). Human capabilities, Sen argued, are not a matter of people failing to access or being unable access to entitlements but rather about the failure of existing social and legal systems to grant people living in poverty adequate entitlements for the means of survival. Capabilities, he emphasised, are about having *freedoms* to do and to be whatever a person chooses to do and be and has reason to value. Sen distinguished between 'capabilities' and 'functionings'. The 'functionings' of food, for example, can be understood as: a) the intentional act of eating, b) physical functioning, c) enjoyment of eating, d) the activity of processing food, and e) the state of being nourished rather than undernourished or malnourished (see Crocker, 1995). Meeting the 'functionings' of food, however, depends on a person having the freedom or 'capability' to choose under the political and social circumstances in which they live. Choosing to be vegetarian (or vegan) is not simply a matter of choice but having the freedom, or rather capability to choose. Capacities are therefore about having 'opportunities.' This report argues that the pantry promotes 'food security' both by providing opportunities for members to meet the 'functionings' of food and by enhancing members' capabilities. It achieved the latter by providing members various 'food' options and the choice (freedom) to select their own 'food' shopping, and to consume 'free' sweet treats (cakes and biscuits) and hot drinks in the pantry 'café', or not.

Broadly speaking, the Capability Approach has been developed and interpreted (see Deneulin, n.d.) either in terms of neoliberalism and individual freedoms or as structural, political and relational freedoms. While liberal interpretations of the Capability Approach have focused on the evaluation of individual freedoms in specific contexts (e.g. of individual

members of a UK food pantry), political-relational interpretations recognise the contingency of human development and wellbeing on political and structural contexts and relations (equality, forms of democracy, and justice) (see Deneulin, n.d.). It is in this political-relational sense that the report argues the NLP pantry contributes to enhancing community capabilities for achieving ‘food security' in face of rising inequality and poverty in the UK, especially in northern England (See the Food Foundation, 2023). The capabilities, the report argues, are also enhanced in the pantry through the increased agency of members that the creation of specific social ‘food’ spaces promote and in which mutual aid relations develop, flourish and endure within and beyond the pantry. The effect of this, is an enhanced sense of wellbeing, ‘community’, and belonging among local people who participate in the pantry.

## 2. Background

*Developing Models and Services: 'Foodbanks Plus', 'food pantries' and foodbank warehouses*

Foodbanks and food pantries are both relatively new additions in the food landscape in Britain. Pantries, however, followed foodbanks which began to appear from the early 2000s. Both have since become normalised features in Britain's 'food landscape'. Following the rise of 'food insecurity', foodbanks and foodbank use increased and austerity after the 2008 financial crisis, an All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry on Hunger was initiated in 2014 to explore 'the reasons behind the large rise in the use of food banks, and associated provision of emergency food assistance' in the preceding years. One of the key demands of the APPI's report was for a 'food bank plus' model that provided advice, skills and advocacy services, as well as food and human friendship under one roof and which could more effectively tackle the causes and symptoms of hunger. As a result, foodbanks have developed to include 'social spaces', as some food pantries also do.

There appears to have been a widespread and positive response to the APPI's demand for foodbank provision based on a 'food bank plus' model. In Moller's (2021) recent of foodbanks in the UK, many provided a range of services to visiting clients (foodbank users), and welcomed them into a social space where they were served drinks and occasional meals and could attend individual 'clinics' with volunteers who would signposting clients to welfare services for support to meet other needs such as to meet fuel costs and address housing issues.

Foodbanks have also developed in other ways since the 2000s. Foodbank warehouses now exist and have been set up to stock and distribute 'food surplus/waste' to 'food providers.' Much of this 'surplus/waste' is provided on a regular basis by large local supermarkets in addition to their customers' 'foodbank' donations. The 'food providers' include food pantries and 'traditional' foodbanks, like the Trussell Trust (2024) that supports a nationwide network of foodbanks to provide emergency food parcels to 'people facing hardship in the UK'. These emergency three-day food parcels, however, are distributed based on 'eligibility' which is based on needs assessments of individual 'adults' and 'children and families' carried out by social workers or health professionals who also hand out food vouchers to those deemed

'eligible'. Pantries, by contrast, are a universal food provision service that all local residents are eligible to access and join as paying 'members.'

Stockport Homes Housing Association (SHHA) were among the first to set up food pantries in the UK in 2014 under the name: 'Your Local Pantry' (SHYLP). SHHA set up these pantries after their tenants reported that they were struggling to pay their rent as well as their rising utility and food bills. 'Your local Pantry' charged tenants who joined the SHYLP a membership subscription fee, typically £3.50 a week. SHHA has now set up five SHYLP schemes and states the following about the pantry model on its website:

- 'Pantries go beyond the food bank model, creating a sustainable and long-term solution to food poverty'.
- Pantries provide 'additional opportunities of volunteering and training'
- And, pantry members have reported 'improved financial positions, improved health and well-being and reduced isolation.'

inspired by Stockport Homes, Church Action on Poverty (CAoP) established the 'Your Local Pantry' (YLP) national network of independent food pantries in Britain.

Like the Stockport Homes' pantries, independent pantries in the 'Your Local Pantry' network are also locally based and operate as 'food clubs' with members, who pay a weekly subscription fee. This fee entitles members to access the pantry and 'choose' from a range of food products in the 'pantry shop'[2]. These include fresh, refrigerated, and frozen foods as well as 'long-life' / 'ambient' foods in sealed packets, cartons, tins, or jars. The weekly membership fee during this research was £3.50, but, after consultation with members, the leadership team increased this fee to £4.00 a week, a response to a reduction in 'food' ('surplus/waste') supplied each week by the local foodbank warehouse and Fareshare. Fareshare is 'the UK's network of charitable food redistributors' that comprises of 18 independent organisations.

[2] The 'pantry shop' is not a term that was used by pantry members but rather one the report uses to describe this 'food space' and the social situation, activities, and behaviours between volunteers and non-volunteer members in this 'food space'.

Giving members 'choice' over the 'food' they select is how pantries in the 'Your Local Pantry' network seek to create a sense of 'dignity' amongst 'members' and mitigate feelings of 'shame' associated with poverty and foodbank use. These are highlighted as strengths of the pantry model and a fundamental distinction between food pantries with foodbanks, as 'Your Local Pantry' also implies on its website:

> 'It can be very hard to feel dignified and positive if you are receiving a pre-packed parcel that someone else has chosen.'

Pantries also aim to promote 'choice' and 'dignity' by providing a range of foods to meet the specific nutritional and dietary needs of individual members (and their families) and their preferences related to health, spiritual/religious beliefs, cultural practices, age and development (baby/child/adult).

The belief that everyone should have ready access to 'good food' is also one of YLP's underpinning values and the basis on which independent YLPs also promote 'choice' and 'dignity'.

*The Feeding Liverpool Food Alliance and Liverpool 'Good Food Plan'*

As a member of the Your Local Pantry network, the Northern Local Pantry (NLP) is affiliated with Feeding Liverpool Food Alliance and the city's 'Good Food Plan'. The Feeding Liverpool Food Alliance was created in 2015 as,

> '..a local pilot of Feeding Britain, an independent charity which was established following the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry (APPI) into Hunger in the United Kingdom in 2014.'

As a result, the NLP's aims are aligned with the 'guiding principles' of the Feeding Liverpool Food Alliance:

- Considering equity, diversity, and inclusion in everything we do
- Balancing immediate relief with tackling the root causes of food insecurity
- Unlocking the power of people and enabling citizens voices to be heard
- Learning, adapting, innovating as we go
- Making information, data, stories, and best practice accessible to all

The key issues, below, identified in Liverpool's Good Food Plan, are also key priorities for the NLP:

- food insecurity
- access to and take-up of healthy, nutritious food
- the impact the food we eat is having on our planet
- and the practices by which the food we eat is produced.

These key issues also reflect a more holistic approach to 'food security' than the narrow, normative definition and commonly used policy concept, which does not take account the politics of land and food production.

According to the 'Your Local Pantry' network, one of the main features of food pantries is that they 'strengthen communities'. It claims that local food pantries are:

- 'Conducive to new relationships and friendships'
- 'Springboards for new ideas that further strengthen communities'
- And pantries 'propel communities onwards' based on 'the friendships that form, the ongoing financial boost, and the chance to be part of a forward-looking group'.

This report echoes these findings and seeks to demonstrate how friendships and communities were and are strengthened through the expansive mutual aid networks, relations and exchanges that developed at the NLP and within and between particular social 'food spaces' at the NLP.

Mutual aid, this report shows, has also flourished among NLP members in the Covid-19 'recovery'; that is, since the removal of most Covid restrictions (including 'social distancing') in the UK in March 2022. The report understands the rise of mutual aid both as a response to the growing and interlinked crises of inequality, poverty and 'food insecurity' in Britain and to the social 'food spaces' at the pantry, which promote mutual aid practices, relationship-building, and strengthen community. This contrasts with the way mutual aid practices have more recently become associated with spontaneous, voluntary acts of kindness and generosity during the Covid-19 pandemic when neighbours willingly shared

resources with those ‘in need’ by delivering emergency (‘food’) parcels and doing ‘food’ shopping for neighbours in the absence of adequate government and welfare support.

## 3. The History of NLP: Food insecurity and mutual aid during Covid-19 and the 'recovery'

The NLP first opened its doors to 'members' in April 2021 when strict social distancing measures were in place during the Covid-19 pandemic that exposed and contributed to rising 'food insecurity', poverty and inequalities in Britain.

The pantry initially received CAoP approval to provide 'food' for a maximum of 50 visitors per week and 150 registered members – one adult per household. Weekly visitor numbers have regularly exceeded this figure during this research, and sharply increased as inflation, energy and food prices rose in the months leading up to Christmas 2022 after which the numbers decreased to between 45 and 60 visitors per week until July 2023 when this research was completed. Numbers also reached a peak in the week before Christmas 2022. This also coincided with the pantry's decision to provide a limited service ('Christmas hampers') to members in the week before Christmas and to close the pantry the week after Christmas Day.

*Women at the Pantry: leadership, values, operation, and participation*

The idea for pantry came from Annette, a lay minister, climate activist, retired public health professional, and trustee of the City's Food Alliance. Annette co-founded and ran the NLP alongside, Cathy – a woman with extensive experience of establishing and running community projects, who has a social policy background and is a congregation member. Strategic decisions at the NLP were taken jointly by these two women who also participated in all the operational activities at the pantry from the procurement and provision of 'food' to the management of volunteers, and provision of 'services' during the pantry's two-hour weekly opening times. Both women took turns, as well, to make homemade cakes which were served ('free of charge') to visiting members in the pantry café.

## 4. NLP: 'The pantry system'

The pantry system provided a structure without which the pantry would not be able to operate. It was a highly intensive system that depended on the strong, stable strategic oversight of a small leadership team who managed and decided on the procurement and provision of resources (food) and 'services' and managed a sizeable team of volunteers who set up and run the 'services' provided at the pantry. In addition to the weekly provision of 'food', the NLP provided local access to other 'services' such as the Citizen Advice Bureau (CAB). A CAB representative attended for a 'trial period' during this study to provide information and advice to members because of the steep rise in energy bills, which an increasing number of the population in Britain were struggling or unable to pay alongside sharp increase in food prices, housing costs (rents and mortgages), and childcare.

*What is the pantry system and how does it work?*

The pantry operated like a local club with a members list and member subscription fee. All the members were local residents. Some were volunteer members, who worked together as a volunteer team to run the pantry every week. Other members preferred to visit the pantry only to do their 'food' shopping and to socialise. The volunteers were initially recruited through two local churches, community networks, and advertising in the local Green Party newsletter, for example. The team of volunteers was considerably stable with many having volunteered since the pantry first opened. Others had volunteered for shorter periods and had moved out of the local area due to changes in their personal circumstances or local residence.

<u>Volunteer Roles</u>

The NLP volunteers tended to perform the same roles each week and expressed individual preferences for the roles they habitually performed. Many volunteered every week, while others volunteered fortnightly by signing up on the volunteer rota. These roles included a member volunteering at the church door to greet visitors, welcoming and engaging them in a friendly chat before handing members a wooden heart-shaped token bearing a number to indicate their place in the shopping queue.

Arrival and Access

Members (and first-time visitors) progressed in a clockwise direction passed the front of the altar, the 'children's corner' (set up for the pantry), and pantry storage racks of 'dry' food, before arriving at the far corner and entrance to a large gazebo. Two volunteers usually sat at a table inside the gazebo entrance where they would register visiting members' details and record members' subscription payments. They would also ensure that no more than one adult member per household was registered to shop each week. The subscription money would be stored in a cash box that a trustee from the local foodbank warehouse would collect at closing time. Members' details were handwritten in a membership logbook and then logged on the pantry database before the pantry closed. This data fed into the central 'Your Local Pantry' database managed by the regional Foodbanks Network. The Foodbanks Network ran the Foodbank Warehouse that weekly delivered NLP's main (dry) 'food' order.

The Kitchen and the Café: Hosts and Guests

After paying their weekly 'membership fee' (£3.50), members had the option to proceed ahead to 'counter' (serving table), where other volunteers would serve them tea or coffee, with or without milk and sugar. One volunteer stood behind the counter in the **kitchen** area serving teas and coffees while another volunteer would wash and dry up. The volunteers would also invite members to eat the sweet treats - homemade cakes and a selection of shop-bought biscuits. The sweet treats were laid out on smalls plates on circular tables in the **'café'** area, which occupied the remaining space in the large gazebo inside the church.

The **kitchen** had a fridge and large catering table, a kitchen sink and draining board, and cupboards filled with cutlery, cooking utensils and crockery. At the opposite end of the kitchen, there was a small sofa and communal seating area which volunteers (and the researcher) used as a bag/cloakroom and occasional bicycle store during their pantry 'shift'. Tea towels and dish cloths were left to dry on the radiator by the sink. Coffee was brewed in a machine on the worktop and white china mugs were placed upside down on a tray from where volunteers would serve members as they approached the serving table. Over time, a range of herbal teas were added in response to the needs, preferences, and requests of individual members, increasing the variety of (healthy) options available.

From ‘Café Culture’ to Shopping

Teas and coffees were served free of charge as were the cakes and biscuits laid out on the tables where members would sit, wait and ‘chat’ as they waited for their number to be called out, telling them that it was now their turn to shop in the pantry. The volunteer who called out the numbers stood behind a low lectern, placed in the gazebo doorway opposite the entrance. The volunteer would then collect members’ tokens as they were welcomed and accompanied through the pantry ‘shop’ by a volunteer **‘personal shopper’**. The ‘personal shopper’ supported members by carrying the double-handled plastic lattice shopping basket, by providing information and advice on the ‘food’ available, and by assisting members to calculate and negotiate their food allowance based on the pantry’s ‘hearts’ and ‘diamonds’ pricing system. ‘Hearts’ were more expensive food items or those that were in short supply, while ‘diamonds’ were less expensive food items such as dry foods that come in packets, tins, or glass jars. For £3.50, members were permitted to choose three ‘hearts’ and seven ‘diamonds’ every week. On the morning before the pantry opened, a small group of volunteers would meet to categorise and price the items in that week’s foodbank delivery into ‘hearts’ or ‘diamonds’. The value and price of a food item depended on what kind of ‘food’ it was and the quantity that had been delivered, which varied from week to week. Volunteers also picked up and delivered ‘food’ from Fareshare and the local foodbank warehouse.

The volunteers would do their food shopping, individually, and towards the end of the pantry opening times, and often also choose items that would otherwise become ‘food waste’. Such items might include leftover packs of fresh meat that could not be frozen for health and safety reasons, and which could not be donated immediately to a neighbouring pantry or food provider that was open or would be open in the required timeframe.

The Pantry Shop

A tall fridge stood before members as they entered the **'pantry shop'**. The fridge was stocked with a selection of individual meat packs, which usually included packs of chicken breasts, sausages, and bacon, although the range sometimes varied. The meat packs were supplied by a craft butcher which also delivered meat packs to the other pantries in the YLP network. NLP ordered £90-worth of meat from the butcher's every week. Other chilled meat and non-meat food items were also laid out on the fridge shelves. These items were all 'food surplus' redistributed to the NLP by Fareshare or donated directly by one of the large supermarkets in the area.

A freezer stood beside the meat fridge this was stocked with a selection of **'local' 'gluten free' pies**, made by a local family business. These pies were added in response to several individual member requests for regular gluten free, vegan, and vegetarian options and expanded the variety of 'good food' options available at the pantry.[3] The pies were not 'food surplus' but rather paid for out of the members' weekly subscription fees. These pies were also sold as individual pies in local health food shops which would have cost each member more than one 'heart' in their weekly pantry shopping basket. However, the volunteers agreed to use the membership fees to pay for and subsidise the cost of the weekly order of gluten free pies, which were priced at one 'heart' each.

*Fresh 'fruit and veg', 'food surplus', and supply chains*

The pantry received fruit and vegetables from a local produce warehouse and kept the order the same each week. This ensured consistency and increased availability as the fruit and vegetables ordered tended to be available all year. The actual supplies could vary, though. Some items, such as cauliflowers, were used to replace carrots when they were in short supply. But this created a supply issue. Because carrots weigh less, more carrots would be delivered, and also guarantee that the vegetables would not run out before every member had done their pantry 'food' shop. The pantry's supply of fruit and vegetables depended

[3] Comment by one the founding volunteer members.

both on seasonal availability and if and how much 'food surplus' existed at a given time in the supply chain. Any change made to the 'fruit and veg' order by the supplier due to seasonal availability or supply chain issues therefore caused 'food' stock and food provision issues for the pantry leadership team and volunteers. These issues also intensified as the number of registered members and weekly visitors to the pantry increased, particularly leading up to Christmas 2022 when the number of visiting members reached a peak. By then, inflation had soared as had energy, food, and housing (rental and sales) prices in the UK. The Conservative government also ended its support to reduce energy bills in March 2023.

In July 2024, a Labour government was elected to office and announced, two months later, its decision to end universal winter fuel payments for pensioners and make them means-tested. 10 out of 11 million pensioners, who do not receive pension credit, will therefore no longer receive winter fuel payments and neither will people in receipt of other benefits such as 'personal independent payments' (PIP). Winter fuel payments have been worth £100 and £300 and have been paid since they were introduced in 1997 to support struggling pensioners pay their winter fuel bills and food and housing costs (rent).

The Labour government has also recently announced a renewed rise in energy prices from Autumn 2024, while energy and food bills have only decreased slightly since they first rose sharply in late 2022. The 'cost of living' has therefore intensified, and will further intensify, for many but not all in Britain. The most 'vulnerable' and socially excluded groups, who are already living in poverty, will be worst affected. It therefore seems likely that the gap between 'rich' and 'poor' in Britain will further increase, that independent food pantries will receive an increasing number of visitors and membership requests and receive increasingly less 'food' ('surplus/waste') from large supermarkets and donations by their customers – the British public. Addressing poverty, inequality and 'food insecurity' in Britain are about political choices and systemic change. 'Food insecurity' is about social and legal justice (Hayes and Maynard, 2024) and climate justice for all of humanity and repairing the planet and the Earth's collapsing ecosystems.


Melinda


2 for 1

## FINDINGS: 'Food Stories' and 'Food Spaces'

During research visits to the pantry, I spoke to many members (volunteers and non-volunteers) about 'food' and the meanings and uses of 'food' at the pantry. Most of these conversations took place in the café area while members waited and socialised over tea and cake. The first part of the 'Findings' focuses on the personal 'food stories' shared with me during my conversations with individual members about 'food'. However, it was only after several months that I realised most members generally did not talk about 'food' except for in conversations with me for this study. 'Food', rather provided the context and particular 'social situations' in which other topics were discussed and kinds of exchanges happened, including mutual aid. The second part of the 'findings' therefore focuses on 'food spaces' in the pantry and the particular ways 'food' was used and presented in and to create particular 'food spaces'. It also analyses and explores the kinds of behaviours, attitudes and exchanges that took place within and across these pantry 'food spaces'. These findings are based on participant-observation and in-depth individual interviews with a select number of pantry members (volunteers and non-volunteers), who expressed an interest in being interviewed for this study.

*FOOD STORIES: childhood 'food' memories, nostalgia, 'home comforts' and the 'unfamiliar'*

Members shopping, cooking, and eating preferences often reflected individual memories of 'food' they had eaten as a child, and especially meals prepared by mothers. One member, for example, commented that she planned to buy lentils from the pantry that day to make lentil soup like her mother used to. It was cheap to make while the woman also commented that she could not afford to make lentil soup the way her mother did, with ham hock, because meat is too expensive, nowadays, and ham hocks are hard to find in the shops and are not stocked at the pantry.

Another member also commented that lentil soup was a 'childhood favourite' and had asked their mother to teach them how to make it as a lone adult, having to cook their own meals. This person also asked their mother to teach them how to make 'Scouse' and placed an emphasis on the method of 'dicing, not mincing' the meat for it to qualify as 'Scouse'. This illustrates how 'Scouse' is used to refer to the meal, as a regional and cultural culinary product, and the preparation method, which both carry meaning and are a source of pride.

This pride is about a sense of family pride, family home (comfort), and family belonging as well as a local, cultural and regional sense of pride, home (comfort), and feeling of belonging to a place – Merseyside. The word 'Merseypride' embodies this sense of pride and is commonly used by local people to define themselves and what it means to be 'Scouse'.

Roast dinners were also a source of 'home comfort' and family as well as regional pride for some members, although roast dinners tend to be seen as a national dish (British/English) and source of national pride, heritage, and identity. For one member, however, roast dinners were about 'family' and belonging. The member expressed how they were going to make roast chicken for their mother, the way their mother used to cook it – with an Oxo cube and Marmite smothered over the top of before placing the chicken in the oven and packing it into boxes to store in the freezer so their mother had 'ready meals' that would also be cheaper than buying and cooking individual meals. Their mother lived outside the city, which made it difficult for them to visit regularly.

Food was also a source of nostalgia about 'home' and 'family' for a pantry member who was a Kurdish Muslim from Syria. The member was seeking asylum in the UK after fleeing persecution in their 'home country', where they had left behind their ageing parents, and other relatives. They had been 'dispersed' to Liverpool and arrived at the pantry by chance - and choice - after setting out to explore the neighbourhood on foot from where they had been housed in a room in a hostel for asylum seekers. They had been attracted to the local area by the nearby local parks and wild birds that reminded them of the village where they used to live and longed to return to in Syria. The member reminisced, nostalgically, about the 'food' in Syria, which they longed to eat again, especially the yellow Syrian 'Boukrati' 'honey figs' they used to eat for breakfast every morning.

Another member talked about their Caribbean heritage and the influence this had on the kind of 'food' they bought at the pantry and the meals they prepared. Meals, that is, that they had eaten since their childhood and had learned to cook from their mother. The person in question continued to cook and eat regularly with their mother, who was also a member but had not been able to come that day. What this example highlights are the associations members made between 'food', as a source of comfort and nostalgia, and their memories of childhood, 'home', 'family', and especially their 'mothers'. Telling 'food stories' therefore also

appeared to evoke a sense of ‘familiarity’, belonging, and wellbeing for those who narrated them.

The associations between ‘food’, ‘familiarity’ and belonging, were also evident in other ways at the pantry. The owner of the local gluten free pie company, for example, commented during a delivery that the ‘traditional’ pie flavours such as the ‘meat and cheese’ were the most popular, while they sold less ‘chickpea and coconut curry’ pies because the recipe was less familiar to local customers. The owner and volunteers present, however, all agreed that the chickpea and coconut curry pies were the tastiest.

The familiarity or unfamiliarity of ‘food’ also influenced members’ food choices at the pantry. On one occasion, sealed packs of ‘duck ragu’ were delivered and displayed as ‘food surplus’ in the meat fridge in the pantry shop. One of the volunteers suggested this had most likely been donated by a ‘high-end’ local restaurant that had produced too much stock meaning that the ‘food’ would have gone out of date before it could be consumed as well as because of the reduction in customer demand in the intensifying ‘cost of living’ crisis. High-end restaurants had also previously donated ‘food’ to the pantry during the Covid-19 pandemic when the pantry first opened, as the volunteer recounted:

> ‘We had tonnes of stuff, after lockdown, from restaurants. Food was coming at us from every angle. Then that stopped, but some has started coming back again as restaurants are struggling and going out of business - like my favourite local restaurant that closed on Sunday!’

The ‘duck ragu’ was popular with some members, but it was unfamiliar and unpalatable to others because the contents were hard to identify as ‘food’ (shredded duck in a ragu sauce) while it was broadly recognisable as a ‘high end’ food product. One member, for example, jokingly dismissed the ‘duck ragu’ because they said, ‘There was no point in having ‘duck ragu without the duck to put it on’.

Unfamiliar and unpalatable ‘food’ also arose as discussion points in other ways at the pantry. Cartons of potato milk, for example, regularly featured in donated ‘food surplus’ and were eventually given away as ‘freebies’ at the end of the pantry shop because they were unpopular with members, so the stocks built up, taking up valuable storage space. The potato milk seemed generally ‘new’ and unfamiliar to most members (volunteers and non-

volunteers) as it was to the researcher, too. Nonetheless, it was also widely recognised as 'food surplus' and a 'food' product that was a 'healthy' and 'sustainable' alternative to dairy milk. This also reflected dominant narratives about 'food' promoted through mass media and marketing which are broadly 'consumed' by the public. It was not surprising, therefore, that a volunteer suggested using the potato milk to increase the nutritional value of soups and stews to a member while they shopped. The member, however, responded by suggesting they might use the potato milk to feed their plants, which they explained would likely thrive and grow on the starch in the potato milk to the volunteer's and my own surprise. The member had extensive horticultural knowledge, having worked as a gardener, and had cultivated an allotment for many years.

Commodified and mass produced 'food' products were also widely regarded as unpalatable and undesirable 'food'. One mother described her anguish and distress about the poor quality of chicken sold in British supermarkets, and her desperation to find 'healthy' chicken in the UK that she used to find so easily and took for granted when she lived in Spain where she was born and raised. 'I can't find 'fresh' chickens that have been raised on a farm here except for at the pantry'. How a chicken had lived, been raised and was killed mattered deeply to this woman, who emphasised that the way a chicken was treated during its lifetime affected the meat and was also passed on through the body to the person who ate it. This had been a particular source of concern for her during her pregnancy, as it continues to be for expectant mothers in Britain, who the woman stressed, struggle to find affordable 'healthy' meat for themselves and their children, before and after birth.

Furthermore, female members often expressed a reluctance to buy tinned food products. Many also preferred to opt for fresh 'food' rather than canned fruit and vegetables and distinguished between kinds of tinned 'food', which qualified as 'good food' or not. Tinned chickpeas, kidney beans and sweetcorn, for example, were all generally classed as 'good food' whereas tinned carrots were not, and tended to be avoided, especially if fresh carrots were available, as they regularly were.

Most members interviewed stated that they would like (but also did want to ask the volunteers) to make a wider variety of fresh fruit and vegetables available. Some also valued having fewer but consistent fruit and veg options every week because it meant they could

make weekly meal plans before their pantry shop, do their shopping more quickly, and be less likely to 'waste' food.

Salad vegetables were especially important for one member who wished there were more salad vegetables and grains, like bulgur wheat, available at the pantry. Salads were an important part of their Middle Eastern heritage, which they had enjoyed making and eating since they were a child.

'Food' choices, uses, and 'food stories' evoked feelings of nostalgia and fondness for the 'past' among members telling these stories as they 're-lived' and often expressed a sense of longing to return to 'food' experiences and social events at which the 'food' had been shared. 'Food stories' also appeared to provide a medium through which members articulated ways of living, being and belonging in the world, and their views on how to live. Above all, though, members' 'food stories' often appeared to be tales about how to live *well* (and survive), and in the face of poverty, inequality, hunger and 'food insecurity'. These 'food stories' are particularly poignant in the context of the current crises of capitalism, democracy and the climate and biodiversity catastrophe, which are responsible for worsening poverty, inequality, 'food insecurity' and the creation of 'food surplus' and 'waste'. The following 'food story' was perhaps *the* most poignant I heard during this study about how to live (well) and how 'food' and food sharing can be a form of solidarity, mutual aid, and resistance.

The narrator of this 'food story' was an older person. In their story, they reminisced about foraging for sweet, wild strawberries in Spain and sharing bread and jam with asylum seekers at a refugee camp in the South of France provided by Red Cross/Crescent volunteers. They recollected visiting luscious Arabic food markets in the French Pyrenees while living with refugees, who had previously fled persecution under Franco's regime during the Spanish Civil War. They had travelled around Europe for months, having left with little money and no guaranteed source of income, and wearing no more than the clothes they stood up in and a sleeping bag tied to their waist by string. They explained how they had chosen to go travelling in Europe rather than spend time in a mental health institution in the UK, recovering from a brain injury. Nowadays, the person continued to save their welfare benefits, though now much diminished, so that they could go travelling in Europe again.

Another ‘food story’ that numerous (non-volunteer) members recalled was a collective cooking workshop that took place at the church before Christmas 2022, which all pantry members were invited to attend. The workshop was delivered by an outside caterer/tutor who taught participants how to prepare and cook full course meals, which they prepared and ate together and with invited friends and family. This ‘food story’ was repeatedly recounted as a positive experience:

> ‘People who didn’t know each other, came together and cooked together, and socialised together.’

> ‘[The tutor] showed us how to make Italian and Indian meals and did the bread for each and there wasn’t just one, but two main courses and the sides that go with them. We were also allowed to bring along friends and family to eat the meal with us…. I still make the onion bhajis that I learned how to make [at this workshop].’

The WhatsApp group set up for the event had ‘gone cold’, so one of the participating members decided to ask the pantry volunteers and leadership team if another cooking workshop could be arranged. Other non-volunteer members, who had and had not participated in the workshop but often heard this ‘food story’, had also made similar enquiries with the pantry volunteers and leadership team. They had also suggested whether a simpler event might be organised, such as soup making which members could cook and eat together while socialising and organised on a regular basis. The members were keen for such events to be organised because they recognised the benefits of collective ‘food’ activities for promoting wellbeing and overcoming feelings of social isolation and loneliness. One member I interviewed was so keen for cooking events to arranged again that they began making thinking of ways this might be possible during the interview. They suggested, for example, that non-volunteer members might organise collective cooking events at the pantry for themselves, with each member bringing an ingredient such as Oxo cubes. They also emphasised how preparing and sharing meals was also a way for members to socialise and have fun together at the same time.

## FOOD SPACES

The pantry was 'housed' and operated in a local church and been approved by the Parish Church Council. The pantry members included volunteers and non-volunteers who were congregation members, while not all members were Christian or congregation members. Eligibility for pantry membership was not decided based on religious affiliation but rather by local residence. Members had to live in the local area, which was defined by local postcodes and 'ward' boundaries.

*The Church: a 'food' space', 'housing', and 'community'*

According to the French literary theorist, Roland Barthes, 'food', clothing, and housing all operate as 'signs' and 'signifiers' in human communication systems. Barthes' uses the example of the 'business lunch' to illustrate how it implies a particular kind of 'social situation' associated with particular ways of behaving and communicating as well as with particular kinds of 'food' and expectations about how 'food' will be presented and is consumed. In other words, the 'business lunch' creates a particular kind of 'social situation' and relaxed environment that is also conducive to making business deals.

The church that 'housed' the pantry can therefore be understood as both a 'sign' and 'signifier' with underlying meaning as well as a 'social object' that implied a particular 'social situation' associated with a certain set of behavioural norms and ways of communicating in a 'church'. These meanings were clearly understood by pantry members whose attitudes, behaviours and ways of communicating at the pantry reflected wider social and behavioural norms, attitudes and ways of communicating associated with visiting a church: acting with respect, calmness, humility, and deference.

Pantry members also widely agreed that the pantry's location in a church implied 'respect' and recognised the need for all to act with respect during visits to the pantry. Volunteer and non-volunteer members, alike, would also regularly remark on how welcoming, sociable, calm and respectful the pantry was. Members' attitudes and behaviours at the pantry, I suggest, also indicate wider public perceptions and attitudes towards churches and what churches signify, as particular kinds of buildings (housing) and 'social objects' in Britain, today.

The association members made between the pantry, the church, and importance of 'respect', may also go some way to explaining the contrasting behaviours that a volunteer at a different food provider had observed where they volunteered, and had shared with a NLP member. Visitors to this 'other' food provider would reportedly complain and be disruptive towards the volunteers and other visitors. Another member claimed that the respect among NLP members was 'special' and 'unique' and contrasted the NLP with a close relative's experience of visiting a local food provider which they had found 'unfriendly'.

Other NLP members, who included those of no religion or faith, often recognised and pointed out the relevance and influence of Christian values at the NLP. One member had also contemplated converting to Christianity based on the sense of belonging and acceptance they felt at the pantry, and because they had been rejected by the leaders of their faith when they had sought their help. For another member, who was of no faith or religion, the pantry's location in a 'church' signified a connection with 'Christianity' and opened up a way of practising Christian values without them having to be a Christian, go to church, or engage with Christianity, as an institutionalised religion.

> 'If it [the NLP] were a church, it's what I'd want a church to be. It's about giving food to people and reducing landfill…..If it were a religion, I'd join it. I'm not against religion or Christianity but I think 'Religion' has hijacked Christian values – the judgemental fundamentalist elements of religion [that is].'

Christian values also informed how another pantry member understood their role as a volunteer at the pantry. For them, volunteering was a way of performing 'service' for others and therefore also of 'serving God'.

The church also held other meanings for another pantry member, as an historic and spiritual building whose walls embodied the prayers of the people who had worshipped there for centuries. For them, these prayers infused and enriched the life of the pantry and the church, giving them both a deeper, spiritual meaning in the present. This illustrates the multiple meanings implied by the 'church' as a particular kind of building and 'social object' and myriad ways of understanding the 'church'. These interpretations of the 'church' go beyond understandings of the 'church' solely in terms of a patriarchal structure that requires reform, and which (some) members of the church also agree needs to happen.

The pantry was also valued by members for its openness and for the freedom that the leadership team and volunteers afforded all members, who were free to *choose* whether they wanted to become a Christian or join the church as a practising Christian, just as everyone has a legal right to belong to a particular faith or religion and hold a particular philosophical belief or not (Equality Act 2010). This 'freedom', however, appeared to come as both a surprise and a relief to one of the volunteers, who stated that,

> 'The pantry is perfect church outreach. It brings people in the community together, but there's no obligation for people who come to the pantry to come to church on a Sunday or to become a Christian.'

A volunteer member also described how they saw their role as a volunteer as being about 'giving (back)' and how this was related to Christian values while they were not Christian or religious. For them,

> 'Two hours sitting in church every week is not giving to others, it's about yourself. Being truly Christian is putting others before yourself. So, if you want to be a Christian, be a good person [not become a good person by being a Christian].'

In general, therefore, the observed behaviours and reported behaviours and attitudes of members during visits to the pantry appeared to reflect Christian values as well as a widespread recognition about the kinds of behaviours and attitudes expected in a 'church' that the church signified as a particular and recognisable building ('social object').

The implications of the pantry being in the church also provided a way for one non-volunteer member to maintain 'respect' and dignity.

> 'I go to church on Tuesdays! That's what we say to each other before we go, knowing we'll next see each other there. It's like when we say, 'See you at the park!' when we're in front of the children and we're going to the pub!'

This comment also highlights the underlying sense of unease and discomfort that at least some (non-volunteer) members felt about visiting the pantry and about how this might be perceived 'respectable' and 'socially acceptable' behaviour, or not. It also highlights how historical ideas about 'the poor' and about living in poverty, including 'food insecurity', have become entrenched and a source of personal and social 'stigmatisation' and 'shame'. The

enormity of the challenge faced by local food pantries in their efforts to create a universal service for all that promotes 'dignity' and 'choice' should therefore not be underestimated.

Despite this emphasis on universalism, non-volunteer members also often emphasised that NLP was 'different' to other pantries and foodbanks. The NLP was 'different' because it *did* promote 'dignity', it *did* strengthen 'community', and it created a valued space for knowledge and information-sharing:

> 'You've paid £3.50. I feel like it's not taking from charity. It's helping the community and helping reduce food waste and that's just wrong. I am also more conscious of food waste because of the pantry. I plan more what I buy rather than just throw food away.'

> 'I used to go to a foodbank [in another part of the city] because I had a [food] voucher. I hated it. I felt degraded and embarrassed though the people there were nice…..[The people at the pantry are] 'So compassionate. All of them want to be there and all of them want to help you. It makes a difference. They're very *nice* people. It's like going from home to home. It's comfy, very comfy.'

Many volunteer and non-volunteer members also treated going to the 'pantry' as a weekly 'special occasion' - something that was enjoyable and a form of respite from the harsh realities of everyday life and in the face of growing poverty and inequality in Britain, today. As one volunteer remarked,

> 'What is it I love so much about the pantry? Why do I keep coming back? I always get dressed up, wear make-up, and make an effort. It creates conversation. It gives something for people to comment on, and makes people feel happy.'

Going to the pantry was also intended to be a 'special occasion' and widely experienced as such by the members. The 'café' was set up in a way that resembled the experience of visiting relatives for 'tea and cake' and feeling of 'home comfort'. One member also described visiting the pantry as being like 'going from home to home'. The pantry 'café' was called a 'café' and simulated the experience of going out to socialise in a café over 'tea and cake' with relatives and friends. Several chairs were set out around large circular tables that each had a large plate of biscuits and homemade cake and once had been decorated with

wildflowers by a volunteer. The 'café' was designed and set out in this way every week by the volunteers and two women who established and ran the pantry. These two women also baked the homemade cakes that were intended to be weekly 'sweet treats' and 'gifts' (not commodities) that they served and shared with visiting members in the 'café'.

The 'café' was a 'social situation' created by 'food' (tea, coffee, cake and biscuits) and its association with 'socialising' as a form of behaviour and way of communicating, while this might mean sitting, alone, surrounded by others socialising over 'tea and cake'. The act of 'serving' drinks and 'sweet treats' (food) is a form of 'hospitality' and behaviour associated with 'café culture' and ways of communicating in this 'social situation'. In the pantry, volunteers engaged in hospitality by taking visitors' drinks 'orders' and serving and regularly replenishing the plates of 'sweet treats'. Treating visiting members as invited 'guests' obscured the visitors' roles as 'customers' and 'shoppers' in the pantry 'shop', which privileged forms of behaviour, exchange and communication based on a 'gift economies' rather than commodity exchange in 'capitalist economies'. Similarly, the clothes rail in the corner of the café also created a space where members 'browsed' and could donate and 'choose' gifted clothes. Members therefore engaged in overlapping gift economies (choosing/donating 'clothes' and 'tea and cake') and commodity economies (membership fees, 'food' shopping and 'food' surplus/waste provision) in the pantry while an emphasis was placed on the gift economy in the 'café'.

The café was a 'free', fluid and (semi)unregulated social space, which contrasted with and obscured the 'pantry system'. This 'freedom' and fluidity in the café as a social 'food space' came across in the following comment by a member,

> 'I can't drink hot drinks fast, so I go back and finish my tea after I've done my shop.'

The member did not feel rushed to drink their hot tea or to sacrifice their place in the shopping queue. They knew they were 'free' to return to the café after their pantry shop to finish their tea, at their own pace, and to continue socialising. This also shows how members exercised autonomy and supported the 'pantry system' to operate 'smoothly and efficiently'.

In contrast to the café, the 'pantry system' was made explicit in the 'pantry shop'. The pantry shop created a 'social situation' in which members were 'food' 'consumers'/'customers', which implied a particular way of behaving associated with food shopping'. Adopting this

kind of behaviour in the pantry 'shop' was 'signified' by the way commodified 'food' ('food surplus/waste' from supermarkets and Fareshare) was set out alongside displays of 'fresh food' (fruit, veg and meat) in refrigeration/freezer units, on shelving racks, and in organised 'food' crates and boxes laid out on long, trestle tables.

The two sets of behaviours and forms of exchange – gift and commodity – coexisted but were more or less apparent in the different 'food spaces' in the pantry. Gift and commodity exchanges also both featured in 'mutual aid' exchanges among members within and beyond the pantry, in the community. The final section, below, discusses these forms of mutual aid and how the 'café', as a particular kind of social 'food space', promoted mutual aid practices that created 'community' and a sense of personal and collective wellbeing among pantry members.

*Food Spaces and Mutual Aid: community relations within and beyond the pantry*

'The pantry is a lifesaver!' one member declared. It had transformed their life and the lives of other members they now knew, had met, and continued to socialise with at the pantry and in the community. This statement also reflected my own observations and conversations with members over the course of this nine-month ethnography. Members formed and strengthened friendships and expanded their friendship networks. New friends were recognised and accepted as now being 'part of the gang', as one member put it. Friendship groups began to meet weekly and walk to the pantry together where they spent time socialising. They also met to participate in joint social, sporting and leisure activities in the community such as trips to the local gym and swimming pool, and, on several occasions each week. This led to some members changing their cooking and eating habits and also to lose weight. Friendships were formed and strengthened through mutual emotional and practical support that pantry members provided each other, which inspired members, and enhanced their sense of belonging, confidence, and wellbeing. Members who had been depressed, anxious and socially isolated - and, in one case, had not left home for five years - became socially connected, socially active, and felt 'happy'. This sense of happiness also inspired one member to return to preparing and cooking 'food' they loved and had fond memories of eating as a child but had replaced with microwave 'ready meals' because they had felt depressed, anxious, and socially isolated.

Mutual aid took many forms at the pantry. Caring about the person, personally acknowledging and expressing interest in members, and listening to members talk about their personal lives, were how all the volunteers behaved at the pantry. These behaviours reflected the NLP's core values and the behaviours and values of the women who set up, ran, and attended the pantry every week. These two women acted as role models for the volunteers and non-volunteer members

Volunteer and non-volunteer members widely respected and attributed the pantry's 'success' to the values and leadership qualities of these two women. This was evidenced by the consistently high number of weekly member visits to the pantry and positive written and verbal 'feedback' the 'pantry team' requested from (non-volunteer) members. Non-volunteer members generally expressed a high level of appreciation for all the volunteers, and for the care they showed them. This has included publicly calling on other members in the 'café' to thank these two women and the volunteers.

Another member valued the volunteers' thoughtful, caring and personal approach:

> 'They always call you by your name. They always ask about my grandson if he's not with me, because I've swapped the days I'm looking after him. They don't have to ask. They care. They remember.'

Caring through expressions of kindness and offers of emotional and practical support were frequently heard and observed at the pantry among members (volunteers and non-volunteers). These acts of kindness and caring could be in response to accidents or misfortunes that members had experienced.

One member, for example, recounted how 'Everyone wanted to help' after a member had had a fall in the pantry and sustained a physical injury, and then had a panic attack. That person had also sought to comfort the injured member by sharing with them that they, too, had experienced panic attacks, and believed that this had been reassuring.

Caring also took of longer-term practical and emotional support among pantry members. Several neighbours, for example, who had met and formed a friendship group at the pantry, organised themselves to do the weekly pantry 'food' shopping for one of them, who had sustained a serious back injury.

These ‘mutual aid’ stories became part of the living and developing histories, memories, and conversations that united pantry members, and bound them together as a ‘community’. ‘The fall’ that one of the women who set up the pantry had sustained when the pantry first opened, was another of these stories. It had become a shared collective memory, especially among the volunteers. Recalling these collective memories was a way of both strengthening relations among pantry members and of caring, being kind, and expressing mutual respect within the pantry ‘community’.

Mutual aid relations also developed from conversations among members in the ‘café’. Many of these conversations were about ‘housing’ (not food!). As one member said,

> ‘People often talk about the problems they are experiencing with their properties, like rotten window frames, or issues with damp and mouldy walls and ceilings’.

Members offered each other advice on how to tackle these problems and encouraged each other to stand up to their private landlords, when they refused to act. Private landlords were the worst for this, it was widely reported.

Another member, who lived in shared housing in the area, lamented the time when cooperatives had existed and recounted with pride and nostalgia how they used to run their shared housing as a cooperative. This member’s experience of participating in a cooperative appeared to shape how they viewed and participated in the pantry and may also have influenced how other pantry members, with similar experiences of cooperatives in Liverpool, viewed and participated in the pantry as a particular kind of social and community space.

One member, for example, delivered lots of pillows to the pantry which they had collected during a removal job for one of the big hotels. The pillows were clean and good quality, but the hotel was replacing them as they were no longer brand new and of a high enough standard for hotel ‘guests’ (customers). The member recognised that pantry members would likely benefit from these pillows that were not only ‘free’ but also likely to be unaffordable for many members in a deepening ‘cost of living’ crisis. It was a voluntary act of kindness and mutual aid for the collective benefit of the (pantry) community.

The pantry, however, was not accessible to all local residents, particularly people who are frail, including older people in the 'fourth age' (aged 85 and over). This appeared to be the case at NLP, and to inspire further acts of mutual aid. One member recounted how she had offered to shop for several neighbours in their street, which was a few streets away from the pantry. These neighbours were all over 75 years-old and had mobility issues which meant that the pantry was too far away and too difficult for them to access.

Mutual aid also took place in the 'pre-queue' which habitually formed outside the church before the pantry opened. For example, one of the volunteers recounted how they had arrived early one week as their friend was visiting and had wanted to see the pantry that the volunteer had often talked about and with great enthusiasm. A member, who was also a regular pantry visitor called over to the volunteer to ask a question on behalf of a woman stood next to him in the queue. The woman had been worrying about whether she would be allowed to do a food shop for her cousin who was had no food and was unable to make it to the pantry that day. The volunteer replied that it was fine because first time visitors who may not be eligible as they are not from the area, are permitted to have one 'free shop' while they at the pantry and if a person is 'in need' and has no 'food'.

This kind of flexibility and exceptions around the pantry 'rules' contributed to relations of mutuality, respect and trust between volunteer and non-volunteer members and visitors. There were also many examples of this happening. Volunteers, for example, completed an urgent pantry 'food' shop and brought it outside for a member, who had turned up late at the church, as the pantry had closed and most of the volunteers had left. The member explained that the 'food' supplies they urgently needed 'food' and for the person with them, who had just been released from prison and moved into the shared residence where they were neighbours.

The café, where most 'mutual aid' practices developed, also operated as a marketplace where mutually aid and mutually beneficial business 'deals' were done, commodities exchanged, and market trading took place. These took various forms. In one case, a member who owned, but could no longer use a 'brand new, top-quality IKEA mattress', gave it to another member who wanted but could not afford to replace their old mattress. The mattress owner was then able to buy a more suitable mattress for themselves, and knowing that their IKEA mattress would be reused, and would not be going to landfill and removed at

no cost. This exchange was agreed in a conversation that developed in the pantry café and which would not otherwise have happened, the member stated.

Other mutual aid exchanges involved 'informal' discussions to explore and negotiate business deals. This included, for example, my own discussions with particular members to explore ways their knowledge and skills might contribute to teaching and learning opportunities at Liverpool Hope University where I am employed as a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences (Social Work). Another example included a business proposition a member made to set up a market stall with me and sell homemade 'sweet treats' at a local monthly market. This proposition developed from a conversation between us in the pantry café. This conversation was also based on a longer history of discussions between us in the 'café' about our shared interests in 'food'. It was also based on the member's assessment of my own cooking ability, which they based on the chocolate brownies I used to bring to share with pantry members during this research.

These propositions were forms of mutual aid, although they were financial propositions. That is because these opportunities emerged from developing relations of trust. This trust developed based on the growing 'familiarity' and continued participation and commitment that we all demonstrated by visiting the pantry over several weeks and by regularly socialising together in the pantry 'café'. This, in turn, also served to create and strengthen 'community'.

Mutual aid also took the form of 'bartering' in the pantry shop between visiting members and the volunteers, who acted as 'personal shoppers'. Much in the same way that customers might barter with market traders in a fresh fruit and vegetable market, pantry members would engage in bartering with volunteer personal shoppers. Members might ask to trade a 'heart' for more 'diamonds', for example, or to relinquish one or more of their seven 'diamonds' for an additional fourth 'heart'. Deals were made on a discretionary basis between non-volunteer members and their volunteer 'personal shopper'. The deals were agreed on the principles of 'fairness' and 'equality' with other pantry members. These kinds of 'deals' or 'trade-offs' were outside the pantry rules (3 hearts and 7 diamonds per member) but were nonetheless permitted because they were deemed to be 'moral' exchanges. No member was deemed to be receiving special shopping privileges. And, as one volunteer personal shopper explained, these kinds of 'deals' not only made members happy

but were also a way of promoting the consumption of 'food' items that might otherwise be left after the pantry had closed and become 'food waste'. This form of bartering could therefore be understood as a form of mutual aid rather than as a form of commodity exchange. These kinds of bartering in the pantry shop were also voluntary acts that volunteer personal shoppers engaged in as acts of kindness, generosity and fairness towards all members and they were mutually beneficial for the volunteers running the pantry, and the 'community', which would therefore have to dispose of less 'food waste'.

Mutual aid practices also included giving ('free') advice to other members, and especially housing advice, and encouraging members to challenge negligent and exploitative private landlords. The 'café' provided an important space in which members could talk and share their problems as well as personal and family news, updates and information about local activities and social events. For one member, who regarded that they had 'no problems' because they could just about live on their 'small pension', 'listening to people talk about their problems' was how they could best support, empathise and learn about what it means to live (and survive) in the face of poverty.

The advice given was often about housing issues and emotional support about how to deal with those issues. Many members also knew and offered helpful, practical solutions. Members also valued the opportunity to talk with others as well as the empathy and care other members showed towards them. Empathy and care, that is, when members explained to others about feeling cold because they could not afford to turn on their heating or they could not afford to choose the large ham in pantry fridge because it had become too expensive to use their oven – let alone cook a large ham for several hours.

Other forms of mutual aid included sharing knowledge and advice on 'permaculture', foraging, and obtaining 'food' from certain kinds of local trees and shrubs, as well as advice on growing and cultivating fruit and vegetables in allotments, and on beekeeping. After recounting how a lime tree in the local woods had come down in a recent storm, a pantry member went on to share how lime trees are a good source of 'food'. Young lime tree leaves, I learned, can be used as salad leaves and the tree sap to make cordials and herbal teas.

Members also shared tips with me such as using the digital App 'Olio' which I was told was good for 'food surplus' bargains, good for reducing 'food waste', and a good place for buying and acquiring other items, locally and quickly, such as furniture, and at a low price.

*The Pantry System: queuing, socialising, and mutual aid*

'It's very efficient, and smooth' and 'It's good, it's well run' were the words many (non-volunteer) members used to describe their shopping experience in the pantry. There was a general recognition that the efficiency and orderliness of the 'pantry system' was necessary and prevented what one member remarked might otherwise be 'a big mele of people all over the place, just grabbing things.'

The queuing system that involved tokens was recognised as part of the 'pantry system' that enabled it to operate 'efficiently and smoothly'. Members also generally valued the pantry 'café' as a social and sociable space full of life and buzzing with human activity, interaction, and communication. The 'café' softened the efficient nature of the pantry system and transformed the 'queue'. The 'queue' was not a visible, regulated and numerically ordered line of people and the 'café' atmosphere also meant that the 'queue was unlike the experience of waiting in a public waiting room. As one member explained,

> 'You don't have to stand in a queue. Because of the way the queue is organised, there's no queue. You're at tables and you're socialising, so you don't feel like you're in a queue.'

The 'café' was originally set up and created by the volunteers in response to member requests for hot drinks (teas and coffees) to be provided while they waited in the 'queue'. At that time, the pantry operated using a regulated queuing system of 'one in, one out' of the church to shop in the pantry. But this queuing system was no longer needed once the risks of Covid-19 had decreased, and the related health and safety measures (social distancing) had been removed. Members generally expressed gratitude to the volunteers and were especially appreciative of them for providing and serving them in the 'cafe'. As one member remarked, '[They] do seem to know how to "cater" for us. They cater for us while we are there – waiting [in the café]', making it an enjoyable social experience.

There was, however, another queue that non-volunteer members created: the queue before the queue. This queue formed outside the church door where members stood and waited before the pantry and church doors were open. Members formed an orderly queue, standing outside, sometimes in the cold and rain, but would also chat to each other. The queue would sometimes begin up almost two hours before the pantry opened and reflected the increased demand for affordable 'food' as food and fuel prices sharply rose in the months before and after Christmas 2022. While fuel and food prices have reduced since then, both remain stubbornly high and are set to rise again after the 2024 Autumn budget.

As the months progressed during this research, members began to take stock of the situation, realising that while it had previously been their 'choice' to turn up early and wait outside before the pantry opened, this had become less of a choice as the number of weekly pantry visitors and demand for 'food' had increased. If members turned up later there were fewer and fewer 'food' choices in the pantry shop where previously members used to be able to turn up at any time. As result, one member reflected on how they might have to re-evaluate their situation to work out if they now had 'no choice' but to join this early pre-pantry queue, which other members also had mixed feelings about.

> 'That's the longest half hour of my life standing out there in that queue. You need to be as near to the front of the queue as possible to get the best food.'

> 'First up, is best dressed. Isn't that how the saying goes? Well, it's like that with food.'

Members also expressed some concern about the need to regulate the 'pre-queue' and the fact that members were waiting for long hours in the cold. One member became known for driving up and sitting in their car with the heating on to keep warm in the 'pre-queue' while others fetched chairs from the church or sat on the churchyard wall to avoid standing while they waited. Sitting on the wall, however, also required a certain level of vigilance to ensure that the order of the queue was respected. As one member explained, occasionally people who arrived as the volunteers opened the church doors, could walk straight in ahead of members who had been sat waiting on the churchyard wall, which was a short distance from the church door. This 'pre-queue' was not part of the pantry system. Regulating the pre-queue was also beyond the capacity of the volunteer members who ran the pantry and were

otherwise occupied stocking the shelves and preparing for opening time while the 'pre-queue' formed and grew outside.'

## 5. Conclusions

The Northern Local Pantry was a significant, reliable, and consistent source of affordable 'good food' and an invaluable social space in which 'community' relations were created, strengthened and renewed. It was a 'lifeline' as one member put it, as it also appeared to be for many other members.

This report has shown the different kinds of 'food' and ways 'food' was used and presented, in particular 'food spaces' in the pantry: the café, 'shop' and 'kitchen'. It illustrated how 'food' operates as a communication system of 'signs' which 'signified' and implied particular behaviours, ways of communicating and relations in each of the 'food spaces'. The 'café' area, for example, created an informal space for socialising which members understood and behaved accordingly. The café was created by the presentation of 'tea and cake' on tables covered by white tablecloths and by volunteer members serving 'tea and cake' to members, visiting the pantry to 'shop' and spend time in the 'café'.

The report also highlights that 'socialising' in the café was where and how friendships were formed and expanded friendship groups, and in which members got to know each other and strengthened and renewed their relations as neighbours. This contributed to the creation 'community' and active social life as well as activism such as members encouraging and supporting each other to challenge negligent private landlords. The report illustrates how 'socialising' in the café also had lasting effects by creating meaningful relations that endured and were strengthened through the social activities and exchanges members organised and participated in among themselves, locally, as friends and neighbours. The pantry café was a social space that had significant implications for reducing social isolation and loneliness among pantry members and extended beyond this space and the café opening times, to the everyday lives of members in the community.

Socialising in the café was also not simply a matter of informal conversations and 'chats' but rather the way in which mutual aid practices and exchanges developed. Mutual aid practices, the report has shown took many forms but which were all based on the same values - 'reciprocity', 'shared humanity' and 'community-driven care' – and involved the 'redistribution of resources'. These were the common features that Littman et al (2022) also identified in their study of mutual aid practices and providers in the US during Covid-19.

While mutual aid practices were also prevalent during Covid-19 in Britain as people voluntarily did welfare visits and delivered 'food' parcels to their neighbours, this report shows how mutual aid has developed since the removal of Covid-19 health and safety measures. Mutual aid has developed in the face of increased poverty and inequality in Britain, rising 'food' and 'fuel' prices, and inadequate statutory support and welfare provision.

The main objectives of the pantry were to create a universal service to provide affordable 'good food' to local people on a consistent basis and in a way that promoted 'choice' and 'dignity' among members. As such, pantries aim to redistribute 'food' (resources) through the redistribution of 'food surplus' produced by 'food' system, which includes large supermarkets that are just one of the global supply chains. This report has shown that pantries have limited capabilities and opportunities to replace or transform the global and UK 'food' systems, because pantries redistribute and rely on the 'food surplus' that the global 'food' system produces (and includes large supermarkets). It has also shown how food pantries depend on volunteers and voluntary or 'free' labour' of men and mostly women, who set up, managed, and also made up the majority of the volunteers who carried out the strategic and operational tasks that enabled the NLP to operate every week. This reflects a wider ongoing trend in gender inequality and highlights how gender inequality is also being retrenched as 'voluntary' sector (charities and churches and other religious institutions) step in to take on responsibilities for an increasingly absent state in the UK, which has yet to recognise and the right to 'food' as a universal human right.

Notwithstanding, this report has also shown local food pantries can create social spaces through 'food' that nurture and provide the conditions for mutual aid practices and exchanges – of gifts and commodities - and create 'community' and proximity in relations among neighbours based on voluntary acts of kindness and reciprocity, community-driven care, and a sense of shared humanity. This study has also shown how 'food' has multiple dimensions and can be a powerful 'connector' and emotive issue that evokes a sense of continuity as well as loss and nostalgia for people, places, and events in a person's past. 'Food' memories, the report has shown, were recounted in 'food stories' in the café, as a particular 'food space'. 'Food stories', the report highlighted, were often deeply personal recollections of childhood, and relationships with mothers, which members also reproduced

through the ‘food’ they bought, prepared, cooked, ate and brought to share with others at the pantry and across households with ‘new’ and ‘old’ friends and neighbours in the community. This is how ‘pantry people’[4] created community. This enabled them not only to survive as individuals but to thrive as a community of people who supported each other to survive and live well. This was also despite the increased hardships caused by the ongoing and deepening crises that are fuelling the continued rise in poverty, inequality, ‘food insecurity’ and also accelerating the climate and biodiversity catastrophe. ‘Food insecurity’ is therefore more than simply a matter of feeding people and meeting basic needs. It is about political choices, social and legal justice (see Hayes and Maynard, 2024), and climate justice. ‘Food’ is also a source of memory, affect and personal meaning that has powerful implications for creating social bonds and solidarity.

[4] This was a term used and coined by one of the pantry volunteer members.

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