

The role of food pantries in addressing the poverty premium

Laura Jones, Church Action on Poverty, November 2018

Background

It simply is not right that people in Britain today are unable to afford good food and are having to go to bed hungry. The Your Local Pantry model is an effective way to make sure that people's budgets go further and addresses the Poverty Premium that sees families limited to buying food from expensive corner shops.

Housing provider Stockport Homes started your Local Pantry in 2014 as a response to the increase in the number of people using Food Banks, recognising the need to provide a sustainable approach to reducing food poverty within the area. Since then they have opened four Pantries in total. In 2017 they started work with Church Action on Poverty to develop the Pantry into a model which can be replicated across the country, creating a national movement which will offer members a longer term, affordable, accessible approach to a range of quality food.

The benefits of pantries

The benefits of Pantries go beyond just filling people's cupboards, they provide a breathing space for struggling families by offering fresh food to households that would otherwise be limited to cheap, less healthy food. They also tackle social isolation for members who meet before and after Pantry opening times and get to know the volunteers who run the Pantries, and there's every opportunity for members to volunteer themselves, gaining valuable experience and training. Pantries are designed to look and feel like 'normal' shops and members are able to choose their produce from a range of ambient, fresh, chilled and frozen produce, which all helps to reduce stigma and ensure dignity and choice for members.

Members use Your Local Pantry in different ways. For some people they are an added extra, at around £3 a week, they're a way to improve their weekly shop and members will attend Pantry before visiting a supermarket.

For others Your Local Pantry is a safety net. If they are struggling for money at a particular time, perhaps the washing machine has packed in or the car broken down, they know they have the Pantry to 'fall back on' so that they will not go without food.

For some members they dip in and out of using the Pantry as and when they have a need. For others, particularly those with very limited budgets the Pantry is an on-going essential source of food; without it, people would be going hungry or living on very limited diets.

As one Pantry member commented, "It is really a safety net, in case you do have to pay out an unexpected item. It's thinking well 'I got to buy this, but I got the Pantry on Friday, so I know I will get food in'."

Membership of pantries

One of the distinguishing features of Pantries is that the requirements for membership are minimal and there is no pressure for people to move on. Continued membership is not seen as a problem: as one member pointed out, continued membership benefits the Pantry, it brings in regular funds and maintains the number of members.

Food insecurity does not just stem from unemployment – people in food poverty may be retired, in low income and unreliable work, affected by illness, disability or a myriad of other circumstances. The Pantries in Stockport have had significant benefits for their members, not only the expected financial impact but also improved health and wellbeing and reduced social isolation.

Impact

The Your Local Pantry's recent Social Impact Report found as part of its research that for every £1 invested in a Pantry, it delivered a £6 return in social value. Members can save up to £650 a year and to date in excess of 10,000 visits have been made to Pantries. At least 10 volunteers have gone into employment.

The Your Local Pantry model in Stockport has proven so successful to date that Stockport Homes teamed up with Church Action on Poverty to bring all of their knowledge and tested methods, processes and procedures together to create a social franchise which is now being rolled out nationwide with the support of food redistribution network FareShare. The bespoke software created as part of the package will enable real insight into the members of the Pantries and as the network grows will enable a national picture to be created of Pantry usage and local need.

Organisations and charities are recognising that people want a way out and not just a sticking plaster approach. Your Local Pantry offers the longer-term solution and a safety net for those who need it. We have a real opportunity to create a movement which goes beyond the Food Bank and adds so much more than just providing people with food.

Written by Laura Jones for Greater Manchester Poverty Action.

If you'd like more information on Your Local Pantry please contact laura@church-poverty.org.uk or visit www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk