

Nourish Scotland

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Dignity in Practice Project 2025



Pantry Peer Support Programme Report



Executive Summary

This report explores the role of food pantries in Scotland, highlighting both their contributions and their limitations in tackling food insecurity. It draws on a small-scale learning exchange programme carried out in 2024/25 with 7 pantries in East Renfrewshire, Glasgow, North Ayrshire and Edinburgh.

Pantries have become part of the landscape of community food projects, offering affordable food access and often connecting members with wider forms of support such as fuel vouchers, employability advice, and community meals.

Many projects make a deliberate effort to place dignity at the heart of their services, ensuring members feel respected, recognised, and less isolated. Despite these efforts, pantry users often face significant challenges, for example, restricted opening hours, queuing systems, and reliance on volunteers that can create inconsistent experiences for members.

Food sourcing is unpredictable, heavily dependent on surplus, donations, and supermarket partnerships that often serve corporate interests more than community needs. An overreliance on surplus food further reinforces the problematic link between food poverty and food waste,

produces supplies that are inconsistent, limited in variety, and not always nutritionally or culturally appropriate.

While many pantries work hard to create welcoming and dignified environments, their reliance on charity means dignity can only ever be partially upheld, as members remain dependent on what is available rather than free to choose food in the same way as a normal shopper.

The Scottish Government has committed to ending the need for food banks. This commitment, grounded in human rights, sets out a vision for Scotland to be a place where the right to food is protected. It recognises that everyone should live in a food environment where they can afford, access, and enjoy the food that keeps them well – without having to rely on food aid or charity. The Scottish Government promotes a Cash-First approach to ensure that:

“

“Everyone has a sufficient and secure income to be able to access food that meets their needs and requirements. Where help to access food is required, this is provided in a way that maximises dignity and reduces future need.”

”

The case study in this report demonstrate how even the most dignity-focused projects can be pushed into more transactional, food-bank-like models under pressure, undermining their original ethos. At the same time, evidence from the introduction of the Scottish Child Payment shows that effective policy intervention can directly reduce demand for charitable food provision.

Pantries provide valuable financial support to some low-income households by subsidising the cost of food. However, the current model is not scalable nor sustainable as a societal approach to making food more affordable. True progress in tackling food insecurity requires systemic policy change, ensuring that people can access food with dignity, choice, and security through adequate incomes – rather than through charity.

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Background

Since 2016, Nourish Scotland and our partners at the Poverty Truth Community have been supporting community food initiatives from across Scotland to learn about the **Dignity Principles** and understand how this framework can inform responses to food insecurity.

The Dignity in Practice project involves people who design, deliver and take part in responses to food insecurity. We organise reflective workshops and peer support activities aimed at promoting dignity and human rights.

In recent years, the project has supported the Scottish Government's plan to end the need for food banks, with a strong emphasis on a Cash First approach.

At the same time, we have seen the rapid rise in pantries opening across Scotland. Some food banks have changed to a pantry model. Increasingly, pantries are viewed as a possible alternative to food banks, offering affordable food in ways that may better support dignity. Unlike food banks, they are not seen as an 'emergency' response. They are seen as part of the repertoire which households can use to stretch their budgets and make food more affordable.

Pantries are more like shops, allowing people to choose their own items from a mix of fresh, chilled, frozen, and long-life products. Payment systems vary: some charge a membership fee, others set a price for a fixed number of items, while some offer discounted goods. Because people can make choices and contribute financially, pantries are often seen as a more dignified way to support access to affordable food.

However, pantries share some of the limitations of charitable food provision: they often rely on surplus food, open on certain days and times only, and often require people to queue – thereby sharing some of the same challenges as people experience with using food banks.

In 2024/25, the Dignity Project ran a Pantry Peer Support Programme to understand better how pantries fit into the bigger picture of tackling food insecurity in Scotland. A group of pantries, worked together to exchange learning, share honest reflections, and explore both the opportunities and the challenges of the pantry model.

This report shares what we found, focusing on four themes:

1. Food sourcing
2. Operating models
3. Additional services
4. Dignity in the details

This report draws conclusions based on our findings.

What we did

We recruited 7 community pantries to co-investigate what ‘good practice’ looks like over a four-month period (August to December 2024). Each pantry was different in terms of location, opening hours, shopping system and origin story.

The Dignity Project is based on working alongside people with lived experience of food insecurity. The dignity team involved 2 staff members from Nourish Scotland, a member from the Poverty Truth Community, and a community advisor who worked with us on a previous project.

People with lived experience of food insecurity were involved in each stage of project planning and delivery and provided feedback based on their own experiences of accessing a pantry.

We encouraged pantries to put together a team of people (staff, volunteers and pantry members) to participate in the programme.

Non-staff members were paid for their participation in each workshop or peer visit. Most pantries were able to involve volunteers in the project.

These ways of working ensured multiple perspectives on current practice, helped ensure full representation of each pantry throughout the programme and supported the pantries to embed the learning in their work.

“Going with a volunteer offers more than one perspective.”

Community worker at Blether

However, with a few exceptions, it was difficult to recruit pantry members to participate.



An overview of the participating pantries and how they were operating during this period

Blether, East Renfrewshire

Opening times: Mon – Sat three times throughout the day

Cost: Community Fridge is free, but people can leave a donation

About: Blether opened in September 2023, and they are part of **Propagate**, an organisation which supports sustainable local food projects. The community shop redistributes food that would otherwise go to landfill and offer ethically sourced, eco-friendly products such as organic pulses, plastic-free dry goods, and refillable cleaning supplies.

It also hosts a community apothecary with locally grown herbs and remedies and makes fresh produce from the Incredible Edible Neilston planter available in-store. Alongside a wide range of organic and fairly traded goods, including fresh vegetables, the shop regularly runs workshops on cooking, fermentation, herbal remedies, and natural bath products. An average of 50 people a day visit the community shop.

Courtyard Pantry Enterprise, Glasgow

Opening times: Tuesday and Wednesday, 10am – 3pm

Cost: £3.50 for up to 10 items

About: The Courtyard Pantry offers good quality, affordable food and household items to the community. Membership is open to all, irrespective of circumstances.

It costs £1 to join and membership lasts for as long as it is needed. The pantry sources food in a variety of different ways – from Fareshare, from local wholesalers and from Kinkell Farm which grows local vegetables and herbs. The pantry also distributes free sanitary products and contraception. It is a member of the Scottish Pantry Network.

Dunterlie Food Share, East Renfrewshire

Opening times: Friday 12pm – 1pm

Cost: free

About: The Dunterlie Foodshare opened in May 2019 in response to high levels of poverty in the local area. Dunterlie is in the top 5% of multiple deprivation in Scotland.

The project does not have a structured membership, but 20-25 people attend every week. The Foodshare is for everyone

and there is no requirement for a referral. It works in partnership with the Warm Hub that provides a warm and welcoming space and includes a place for local people to meet, catch up and get a cup tea or coffee and a snack. The project also works with the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Social Security Scotland and other agencies who provide advice and support services to those using the Foodshare.

Largs Food Hub, North Ayrshire

Opening times: Tuesday 2.30pm – 5.30pm and Friday 10.30am – 12.30pm

Cost: £4 per visit

About: The Food Larder was opened in February 2024 to provide affordable access to food to top up a member's

weekly food shop. This is based at Largs Library, and anyone is welcome to join as a member. Each member can come on a weekly basis to select what food they require. They work on a points system depending on household size.

Linthouse Community Shop, Glasgow

Opening times: Thursday 10am – 1pm and Tuesdays 3pm – 6pm

Cost: £1 membership per month. Items are individually priced

About: Linthouse Community Shop has been open for just over a year. It is part of Good Food Scotland, which also runs a larder in Cardonald. The larders were opened to address food poverty

in these neighbourhoods. They also provide **a place for** people **to** access a range of foods closer to home, as some local people had difficulty accessing supermarkets due to mobility issues and health. The larders are open to everyone, there are no joining criteria. The larder is also able to provide fuel vouchers and is **planning** to offer more services such as financial advice in the future.

Oxgangs Neighbourhood Cupboard, Edinburgh

Opening times: Monday to Saturday at 2pm

Cost: £4 for 9 items

About: This project expanded after the pandemic and continues throughout the

current cost of living crisis. They have around 50 regular members. They rely on donations and surplus food. It is open to all in the neighbourhood with proof of address. There is a community cafe and garden.

St Paul's Youth Forum, Glasgow

(at the time of participating in the programme they were in transition from being a food bank to becoming a pantry)

Opening times: Wednesday from 1.30pm – 2.30pm

Cost: still to decide

About: St Paul's Youth Forum is transitioning from a community larder to a membership-based pantry model. In January 2024, most attendees voted to receive pre-chosen Fareshare bags,

though staff felt this reduced choice. Following three months of consultation, attendees agreed the pantry model offered a fairer and more dignified approach. Based at the Molendinar Community Centre in Blackhill, the pantry will operate like a shop alongside the café and partner agencies. Currently, 30-45 people attend the larder each week.

The programme enabled collaborative reflection and facilitated practice development around the Five Dignity Principles. We worked with a wide range of pantries at different stages of development, to ensure shared learning between those with more experience, already demonstrating good practice in some areas of their engagement with community members, and those who were finding it difficult to apply the Dignity Principles to their work or were at early stages in transitioning their services from a food bank to a pantry.

“We think the peer support programme would be an incredible opportunity to give our pantry the best possible start by learning from other more established pantries.”

St Paul's Youth Forum worker

“This would be a good way to gain best practices by learning how others work to further help our members in difficult times.”

Volunteer at Oxgang Neighbourhood Cupboard

The project had three elements:

1. Introduction Workshop

Pantries were invited to complete a self-evaluation of existing practices and attend an introductory workshop, where participants could connect with other projects, learn about the Dignity in Practice project, reflect on self-evaluation, including, for example, reviewing the guidance they provided for their visitors and hosts.



“Doing the self-evaluation activity made me realise personally that if someone who had never been before was to come to the foodshare they would be extremely lost. There is no clear signage or information about where to go or what to do. We will discuss with participants how best to approach this.”

Volunteer at Dunterlie foodshare.

2. Exchange visits

Participating pantries were encouraged to visit at least two other project partners that were recruited to participate, this was to foster mutual learning and collaboration. During these visits, participants observed how other pantries operate, experienced the process of shopping at each location, and gained insight into the diverse ways pantries serve their communities.

Visitors completed a host feedback form to share their observations, reflect on the Five Dignity Principles, and provide constructive feedback. All organizations generously contributed their time, resources, best

practices, challenges and practical tips, demonstrating a strong commitment to improving services and learning from one another. Additionally, the project team conducted visits to all participating organizations, providing detailed feedback for each.



“I found them really interesting. It was good to get some tips that I could take across to improve my own service provision. It was also very nice to meet peers working in the same area.”

Linthouse Community Worker

3. Reflective workshop

Organisations were invited to a second workshop following the exchange visits, to share learning and good practices, and to consider next steps for embedding dignity in their work. Drawing on feedback from the visits, several common themes emerged, and our discussions focused on:

- **Sourcing food** – surplus, donations, from Fareshare, wholesalers, retailers and farms.
- **Operating models** – membership, payment method and price, eligibility, opening times, staff and volunteer needs.
- **Additional support** – fuel vouchers, CAB, employability advice, leaflets, gardening/growing groups, community meals, blether sessions.
- **Dignity in the details** – what did you notice? Examples of good practice.

Participants reflected on the programme and peer visit process as a valuable learning journey. They appreciated the opportunity to share experiences and learn from others, which helped build connections and reinforced that they are not working in isolation.

What we learned

Our learning is summarised under four key themes – sourcing food; operating models; additional support, and dignity in the details.

Sourcing food

Supermarkets: Support, Profit, and Responsibility

Most pantries rely heavily on supermarkets for donations and surplus food. While these partnerships are essential, they also raise questions about who benefits. Supermarkets often host in-store collection points, where customers donate food purchased at full retail price. While this supports pantries, it is also designed to enhance supermarkets' reputations as socially responsible businesses – something that can be called into question in many ways.

Some pantries also buy essential items directly from supermarkets to meet demand. This ensures availability but means pantries are contributing directly to supermarket profits. As one participant noted: "I wouldn't buy products there because I know the supermarkets are getting full price from this community shop... and I understand the unethical practices and waste they can afford to create."

Pantries also play a role in redistributing surplus food, often relying on volunteers to collect and manage it. While this mitigates waste, the volume can be overwhelming, and excess may still have to be discarded creating additional burdens for pantries.

Overall, while supermarkets are critical to pantry operations, this relationship reflects a reliance on corporate goodwill rather than systemic solutions to food access or waste.

Food waste and redistribution

As pantries often rely on volunteers to transport and ultimately discard surplus supermarket food that cannot be used, this model raises several concerns:

- The burden of managing waste is shifted from supermarkets to pantries.
- By donating surplus, supermarkets may avoid waste disposal costs or related taxes.
- Supermarkets benefit reputationally, framing redistribution as environmental responsibility, without addressing systemic overproduction or waste.

Taken together, these practices show that while supermarkets play a critical role in sustaining pantries, the arrangement is far from neutral. It highlights a dependence on corporate goodwill, rather than systemic solutions to food access or waste. A typical shop stocks goods consistently at full price, giving customers straightforward choice without ethical compromise. In a pantry, by contrast, operations are shaped by surplus, donations, volunteer efforts, and the strategic interests of supermarkets rather than the autonomy and choice of its members.

Over-Reliance on Surplus: A Symptom, Not a Solution

Our findings echo concerns raised in recent research, including Anna Baillie's *"An Exploration of Community Food Pantries in Scotland"* (2024), highlighting that heavy reliance on surplus or waste food is neither sufficient for expansion nor for meeting the needs of pantry members.

Surplus supplies are often inconsistent, limited in variety, and do not always meet nutritional requirements or personal preferences. This sourcing model constrains pantries' ability to provide both choice and quality – key elements for maintaining dignity in food provision.

Additionally, continued dependence on surplus reinforces a troubling dynamic: those experiencing food insecurity are expected to rely on the excesses of a flawed food system. In practice, this links food poverty directly to food waste management, rather than addressing the root causes of either problem. Research and media coverage, such as Sheila Dillon's *How Businesses Dump Their Waste on Food Charities* and infographics produced by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), a UK network supporting independent food banks and campaigning for long-term solutions to food poverty, have repeatedly emphasised that food waste alone cannot solve food poverty.

Operating models

Membership and pricing

Most pantries operate a membership scheme, usually charging between £1 and £4 for a set number of items valued at around £15–£20. Membership fees and allocations are often flexible, depending on individual circumstances. Many also use a points-based system, scaled to household size, to help regulate food distribution. These systems can promote fairness, prevent hoarding, and provide structure in how food is shared.

To ensure the system works, members are typically supervised by volunteers or staff as they make their selections. In the pantries we visited, this was carried out with care and respect.

At the second workshop, participants reflected on these systems and agreed that they can be confusing for new visitors, particularly as pantries differ in their rules, eligibility criteria, and data collection requirements. Some require names, addresses, or proof of residence, while others operate without such checks. The absence of means testing was generally valued, but the lack of consistency across pantries was seen as challenging.

What Does Membership Mean in a Pantry Model?

In most contexts, "membership" implies belonging: being part of a group with shared goals, rights, and responsibilities, and often the ability to influence decisions. Membership can foster community, identity, and solidarity.

By contrast, pantry "membership" is in practice much narrower. It functions primarily as a mechanism for purchasing discounted food, rather than as a form of participation or belonging. Members do not generally share in decision-making, and the relationship is transactional.

The majority of pantry members, apart from those at the Blether, came primarily out of necessity, driven by food insecurity rather than by choice.

As one member from St Paul's Youth Forum explained:

"I come here because I can't afford to go to a normal shop."

"Coming to the pantry is not my choice. I just can't afford to go to normal shops."

Member, Linthouse Community Shop



Key Tension

The membership and point systems sit at the heart of a tension: they ensure fairness in distributing scarce resources, but they also risk reinforcing difference and limiting dignity. Pantries provide valuable access to affordable food, but they do not replicate the autonomy, anonymity, and freedom of ordinary shopping. For many members, the experience is shaped less by belonging and more by necessity.

Opening Times: Access on Whose Terms?

Most pantries are open only once or twice a week, for 2–5 hours at a time. While this is understandable – since they depend on volunteer capacity, venue availability, or venue restrictions such as library opening hours – this inevitably creates barriers. People who cannot attend at those specific times, especially those in work or with caring responsibilities, are effectively excluded:

“The people who are currently excluded are those that work when the larder is open. We are restricted to open within the library opening hours and by volunteer availability.”

Volunteer, Largs Food Hub

This again highlights a key difference between pantries and regular shops. Shops are open daily, often for long hours, allowing people to decide when and how to shop. Pantry members, by contrast, must fit their needs into narrow windows of availability.

Limited hours reduce autonomy, make planning harder, and reinforce that pantries are not “just like a shop” but a service shaped by organisational constraints rather than members’ choice.

Queuing: Waiting for Food, Waiting for Choice

Across most organisations, queuing was identified as a significant issue. Members often arrive early hoping to secure a better choice of items by being nearer the front. To reduce long waits, some pantries allocate time slots – but this can create new pressures of its own.

Members must make quick decisions about what to select and how to cook with it, with little time to think. This is compounded by the unpredictability of stock, which varies week to week. Together, these pressures, having to shop at speed, with no way of knowing what will be available, become real barriers to planning meals, particularly for those who need every penny to stretch as far as possible.

Some pantries, like The Courtyard Pantry, provide chairs to make waiting more comfortable. While thoughtful, this does not address the deeper issue: queuing itself creates a visible marker of need.

As one volunteer from St Paul’s noted:

“Some people stop attending altogether because they do not want to be seen standing in line for food support.”

This again underscores the difference between pantries and regular shops. In supermarkets, people browse freely without queuing outside for access. By contrast, pantry queues not only restrict autonomy and choice, but also reinforce stigma, making food support more visible and potentially alienating those who most need it.



Volunteers: Strength and Strain

All pantries rely heavily on volunteers, and some are run entirely without paid staff. Volunteers are often local people motivated by a desire to help their community. Their roles are wide-ranging: collecting surplus food, disposing of waste, organising stock, welcoming members, accompanying them through the store, and handling payments.

Yet volunteers frequently find themselves supporting members in ways that go well beyond food provision – from helping someone apply for Attendance Allowance (a government benefit for those with a disability or health condition) to encouraging another to seek medical help during a moment of distress. While these acts of care show extraordinary commitment, they also highlight a risk: volunteers may take on responsibilities beyond their training, capacity, or safeguarding boundaries. This can place both volunteers and members in vulnerable positions.

The programme revealed variation in volunteer approaches. Long-standing volunteers can sometimes resist change, some may bring empathy or others, conversely, judgement. Participants agreed that induction, training, and ongoing reflection are essential to ensure that all volunteers uphold dignity, avoid assumptions about members' circumstances and ongoing processes and practices offered are fit for purpose.

At the same time, volunteering offers real positives. Many volunteers reported that the pantry gave them purpose, friendships, and stronger community connections.

Nevertheless, this again underlines the key difference between pantries and shops. Shops are staffed by paid employees with formal roles, responsibilities, and training. In pantries, by contrast, the reliance on volunteers means services are shaped by goodwill, availability, and individual attitudes – factors that enhance some services but undermine others.

This raises important questions about whether pantries can truly be described as “just like a shop.” Unlike regular shops, pantries require membership, impose point systems, restrict the time and way people shop, and supervise selections. Choice is limited by what is available on the shelves, which can be unpredictable. While pantries do offer some element of choice, they also remove significant control over what, how, and when members shop.

Income and expenditure

While we did not review the finances of all the participating projects, it was clear that some projects were not able to cover their costs from their sales income and were reliant on external funding. To supplement the limited surplus food available, pantries were buying in food which was then often sold at a discounted price.

Additional Support

Beyond the Pantry

The pantries we worked with are acutely aware that food insecurity rarely exists in isolation. People accessing pantries often face multiple, overlapping challenges – financial, social, and practical. As a result, many pantries have developed partnerships with other organisations to provide a broader range of support alongside food provision.

For example:

- Dunterlie Food Share offers one-to-one appointments with a CAB staff member to address financial, benefits, or legal queries.
- The Courtyard Pantry Enterprise, embedded in a community centre, provides access to a community café, after-school clubs, employability advice, energy support, and partnerships with organisations such as Flourish House and Help Glasgow.

Some pantries also offer vouchers to allow members to shop in regular stores. While this can improve choice and dignity, enabling people select the food they need, it is often dependent on the availability of restricted funding and may be allocated at the discretion of volunteers or staff. This can unintentionally undermine dignity if eligibility decisions are perceived as arbitrary. For instance, one pantry member expressed worry about cooking their food and was required to attend a budgeting course before receiving fuel or gas vouchers.

Other pantries integrate community activities such as community gardens or shared meals. These initiatives foster inclusion, build a sense of belonging, and encourage social connection beyond simply receiving food.

Providing these various forms of additional support is not without challenges and their positive impact is dependent on how it is delivered in practice. For example, seating a CAB staff member at a table in front of all pantry users may discourage people from accessing advice due to privacy concerns or perceived stigma. Pantries must continually reflect on how best to deliver additional support while respecting dignity, choice, and confidentiality at the same time.

Observation: The practice of offering additional support highlights the fact that pantries are in a good position to offer more than food. However, it also reinforces the fact that the pantry model differs fundamentally from a normal shop, where such wraparound services are not required or expected.



Dignity is in the Details

Running a pantry with dignity at its heart is about more than providing food – it is about the small details that influence how people feel when they enter the space. These details significantly affect people's confidence, comfort, and sense of belonging.

Breaking the stigma – building a sense of belonging

The way organisations label their services ('food hub', 'community shop', 'blether', 'food share' vs 'pantry') isn't just semantic – it shapes how people perceive and feel about accessing those services. The right language can reduce stigma and lower the threshold for people to walk through the door.

Branding as a tool for inclusion: A positive example of how branding can be used as a tool for inclusion is Largs' food hub use of Magnus the Viking as a symbol. It's a way to create a sense of belonging. A everyone recognises the icon, everyone feels represented, something that can break down barriers of "outsider vs insider."

"Magnus is something everyone in Largs can identify with. This provides a message of inclusion – everyone is Magnus, everyone is welcome."

Largs food hub volunteer

Tailoring identity to community values

Each organisation reflects a particular identity, whether through the services offered (e.g. herbalist cabinet, the offer of organic products) or the branding and labelling that is used to promote them. It was interesting to see how language, symbols, and community-specific branding were used to shape participation and foster inclusion. These choices clearly influence how welcoming and dignified a space feels.

They also demonstrate how local relevance matters and can be shaped deliberately in social initiatives.

"Everyone in the community would feel good about coming to the Blether, even the name is friendly and welcoming."

Dignity advisor

Yet, while pantries make significant efforts to reduce stigma through thoughtful language, they are still different from normal shops because the very need to reframe their identity reflects the underlying social inequalities that make such services necessary.

Welcoming space

Having someone friendly at the door, greeting people by name, and offering a smile can immediately make the environment feel safer and more supportive. One member reflected:

"This larder and café are definitely a place I would go to – it is welcoming, friendly, inviting, and calm."

Décor and layout

Most pantries we visited made considerable effort to ensure spaces were clean, well-organised, and visually appealing. Examples include:

- The Blether worked with a local artist to create a mural on the display window. Beyond the physical space, small touches, such as friendly banter between staff and members, helped foster a stronger sense of community.
- The Courtyard Pantry: Dark wood shelves and a fresh fruit and vegetable area from a nearby farm created a homely and inviting atmosphere.

- Largs Food Hub: Though small, the space was tidy, with a section providing information about community activities, recipes, and money worries.
- Linthouse Community Shop: Formerly a coffee shop, the layout feels familiar and inviting. The placement of fruit and vegetables near the entrance enhances the shopping experience, and seasonal decorations like Halloween touches add warmth.

These thoughtful touches make visitors feel respected, included, and part of a larger community.

Additional comfort measures:

- Offering tea, coffee, or a small snack can make a significant difference in how people feel while accessing food support.
- Locating pantries within community centres can provide a more holistic experience, blending social support and activities with food provision.

- Some pantries offer products for purchase alongside free items, making the experience feel closer to regular shopping – which helps members maintain their privacy and reduces the stigma of accessing food aid.

Observation: Despite these efforts, pantries are inherently reliant on charity. While the small touches enhance dignity, the model can never fully replicate the autonomy, choice, and experience of shopping in a regular store. Restricted opening times, reliance on surplus food, queueing, complicated payment and access systems were all identified as challenges for promoting dignity.

Fundamentally there is always an underlying tension: the very fact that access depends on charity can, at some level, undermine the sense of full dignity for members.

CASE STUDY: The Limits of Charity

– When Food Pantries Struggle

Background

A community food project, once celebrated as a model of dignity-based practice and a core member of the Dignity Network, has faced increasing challenges in recent years. Originally designed to provide respectful and empowering access to food, the project at the time of the programme operated under significant strain due to rising demand, limited staff and volunteer capacity, and the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Challenges and Limitations

→ Shift from Dignity to Transaction:

The service has increasingly moved toward a transactional model. Pre-packed food parcels dominate distribution, reducing choice and agency for participants. Many now perceive the project as a traditional food bank rather than a community resource, reinforcing stigma and discouraging engagement.

→ Variable Volunteer Interactions:

While some volunteers are welcoming and supportive, others are less empathetic. Participants report instances of intrusive questioning or judgmental behaviour, which undermines the original dignity-based ethos.

→ Accessibility Barriers:

Certain groups – families with children, disabled individuals, non-English speakers, and those working standard hours – face structural barriers to access. Waiting outside, limited opening times, and lack of culturally appropriate foods further restrict access.

→ Staff Frustration:

Staff and long-term volunteers' express dissatisfaction, noting a misalignment between current practice and the project's founding values. The emotional toll of navigating high demand while maintaining dignity-based principles has become a recurring concern.

Despite these challenges, one notable shift was observed: staff reported that fewer families with children were accessing the service following the introduction of the Scottish Child Payment (SCP).

Impact of Policy: The Scottish Child Payment

The observed reduction in demand among families highlights the significant impact of income-based policy interventions. The Scottish Child Payment – by providing direct, regular financial support to low-income families – appears to have reduced the need for emergency food provision among this group.

This contrast illustrates a critical insight: while community food initiatives aim to embed dignity within systems of charitable support, they remain constrained by resource limitations and structural inequalities. In practice, maintaining dignity becomes increasingly difficult under conditions of scarcity and high demand.

By comparison, the SCP addresses the root cause of food insecurity – insufficient income – thereby reducing reliance on charitable food aid altogether. Rather than managing crisis, it prevents it.

This case study demonstrates that while food pantries and charitable projects play an important role in emergency response, they cannot replace the systemic solutions needed to end food insecurity. Sustainable change comes from policy interventions that provide consistent financial support, allowing individuals and families to access food with choice and dignity – without relying on charity.

Ultimately, these reflections underscore the limitations of charity-based models in addressing food insecurity. While pantries provide essential emergency support, systemic policy interventions, such as the Scottish Child Payment, demonstrate a more sustainable and equitable solution. Evidence from our case study shows that when families receive direct financial support, the demand for pantry services drops, highlighting the power of policy to address root causes rather than merely alleviating symptoms. Pantries can complement these efforts, but long-term solutions require a shift away from reliance on surplus food and goodwill toward structural, rights-based approaches that ensure all people can access food with dignity.

Conclusion

This project provided an opportunity for the participating pantries to learn from each other and in some cases to implement some specific improvements in practice.

It was not designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the pantry model. However, it did provide insights into the limitations of the current model, and the barriers to scaling the model to make a significant contribution to food affordability.

Some of the limitations of the current model could in principle be overcome. Pantries could have longer opening hours, operate from attractive and accessible premises, avoid queuing systems, provide good customer service and stock a wider range of food – in other words, be more like regular shops.

To do this, they would have to move beyond their core reliance on surplus food. Yet that has been the pantry business model – get surplus food for next to nothing and sell it at a discounted price.

Reliance on the limited and unpredictable quantity and range of surplus food brings with it a need for rationing. It is also inherently undignified in the way it restricts choice and control.

Just as importantly, this business model is not scalable. The supply of surplus food – particularly in retail pack sizes – is declining and will continue to decline. More surplus may come on stream from further up the supply chain – including directly from farms – but typically will require processing or at least repackaging before being useable. Small operations like pantries are not well-placed to operate with these larger volumes.

As we saw in the project, pantries are already supplementing the supply of surplus food by buying in – but if they sell this at a discount then they have to fund the deficit; and the more customers they attract, the larger the deficit.

Pantries do meet a real need – making food more affordable for low-income households – but can't scale to meet that need on a population level because of their reliance on surplus food and their low price point.

There are other ways to meet that need. One is to move to a genuine membership model such as a co-operative where people organise to share the costs of buying in bulk and share the work of taking deliveries, repackaging and distributing the food.

As well as this 'bottom up' approach, government could take a top-down approach:

- It could fund or even run non-profit grocery stores which in theory could offer lower food prices.
- Government could provide additional cash support to low-income households or offer a 'Best Start' style card.
- It could bring in regulations requiring food retailers to sell a set basket of goods at an affordable price.

It could grant the right to work to refugees and asylum seekers, enabling them to support themselves through employment rather than relying on food aid.

As well as, or instead of, these specific food subsidies Government can use other measures as highlighted in the 'Ending the need for food banks' plan. It can seek to reduce other living costs, particularly energy. It can continue to promote fair work and a progressive social security system, though the key weakness in the current system is Universal Credit which is controlled by the UK Government.

One useful starting point would be to implement consistent measurement of food affordability, in the same way as happens with fuel affordability. This would provide a clearer indication of how much households in different parts of Scotland would have to spend to meet their right to food – and provide a clear basis for efforts to close the affordability gap.

Next steps

This was a small project, and these findings and reflections should be read as a starting point rather than a comprehensive or final account of the pantry model in Scotland. Further work is needed to build on it, and we are looking into doing more work that would:

- work with pantry users themselves, rather than relying mainly on the perspectives of staff and volunteers
- add more detail and evidence where possible, moving beyond the reflections gathered from this small group of 7 pantries
- shift the emphasis further towards solutions, building on the barriers and challenges identified here
- compare different pantry models through a typology, to better understand what works well in which circumstances
- highlight good practice where it exists, and whether aligns with a Good Food Scotland
- looking in more depth at the financial aspects of pantries.



Get in touch

We welcome your thoughts and feedback on this work!



Nourish Scotland

Summerhall, 1 Summerhall Place,
Edinburgh, EH9 1PL

Tel **0131 226 1497**

info@nourishscotland.org.uk

www.nourishscotland.org

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