The Community Pantry Model in Scotland: A Briefing

Scotland Knowledge & Learning Team

Preface

Throughout the latter half of 2023, The National Lottery Community Fund's (from here on, *the Fund*) Knowledge & Learning team carried out an evaluation of three lottery-funded pantry projects across Scotland. [1] At the time, the report was conducted for internal purposes only and the methodology entailed a process of qualitative data collection via interviews with the projects as well as other key organisations operating in the community food landscape in Scotland. Due to the internal intent of the initial report, we will not be sharing any identifiable information here. However, some of the key findings to come out of the research have wider implications beyond the Fund and are relevant for all those working in areas including food poverty, the financial hardship and community-led alternatives. In light of this, the purpose of this briefing is to delineate the key findings in a condensed and digestible format which can act as a sort of guide for those establishing or interacting with community pantries.

The findings presented here pertain to three of the key themes identified during the data collection and analysis. As noted, identifiable data has been excluded, alongside that which is regarded as holding little relevance beyond internal decision-making at the Fund. The three key themes are the following:

- ❖ *The dignity approach*
- ❖ *The success of the pantry plus model*
- ❖ *The sustainability of the pantry model*

Introduction

Food insecurity has been on the rise across Scotland and the UK over the past several years. This is attributable to several economic ruptures including austerity, COVID-19, and the more recent cost-of-living 'crisis' (the latter of which many were experiencing before it was officially labelled a crisis). In response to this, we have seen the rapid emergence of foodbanks across the UK, with the Trussell Trust reporting December 2022 as the busiest month on record for foodbanks in their network (Trussell Trust, 2023). Alongside the emergence and consolidation of foodbanks across the UK, there has been the more recent advent of alternative community-led approaches to addressing food insecurity, including pantries, fridges, and larders (Addley, 2023; Nayak and Hartwell, 2023). This has been particularly apparent across Scotland, where the political will to end the need for foodbanks and reorient the focus to alternative models, including the cash-first approach, has been

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[1] Lauren Taylor, Press and Journals, defines, community pantries "help people access affordable and healthy food, toiletries and household items. They often work on a membership basis, allowing people to sign up and go for a shop-like experience. This means they can go to the pantry and choose which items they need, giving people more independence and tackling stigma."

clear (Tackling Child Poverty and Social Justice Directorate, 2023).

Consequently, the Fund has received a heightened number of applications with a focus on addressing food insecurity, such as community pantries, fridges and larders; community meals; cooking classes; and those experimenting with the piloting of the cash-first model. This has also included funding The Scottish Pantry Network (TSPN), whose self-defined mission is 'to create a sustainable network of pantries providing low-cost food and wraparound services' (TSPN, no date). The internal evaluation focused on three pantries in Scotland; it was carried out by the Scottish Knowledge & Learning team, in collaboration with place-based funding staff. The two strands of research for the evaluation included:

- ❖ *Dignity and community support beyond food*
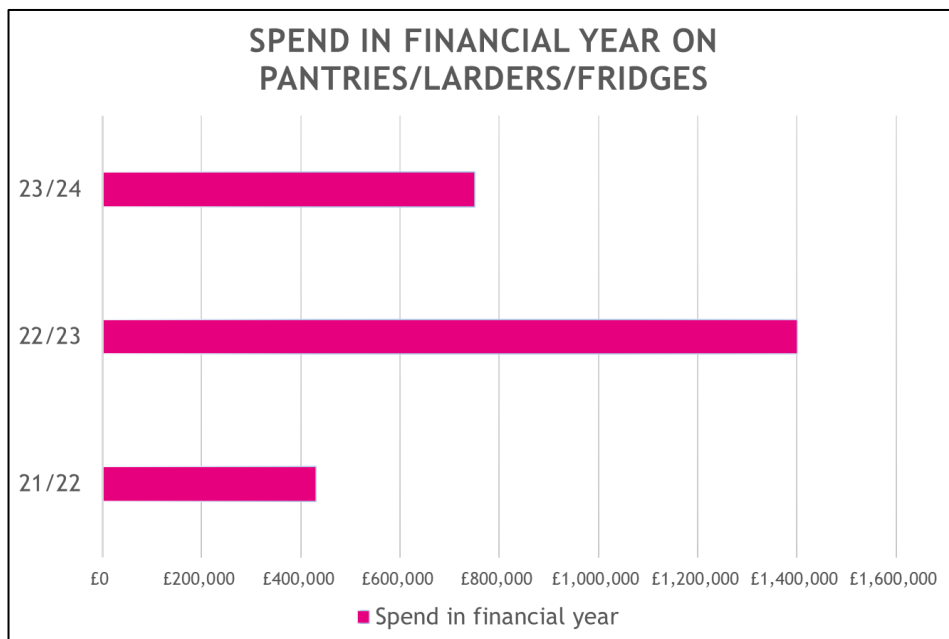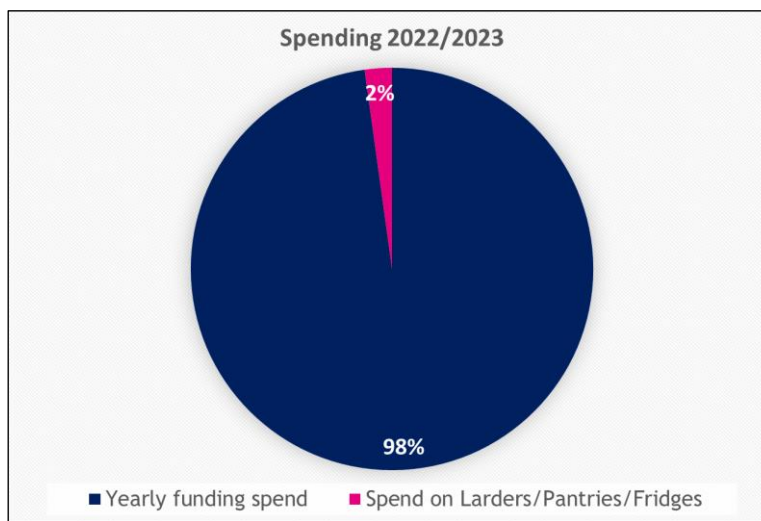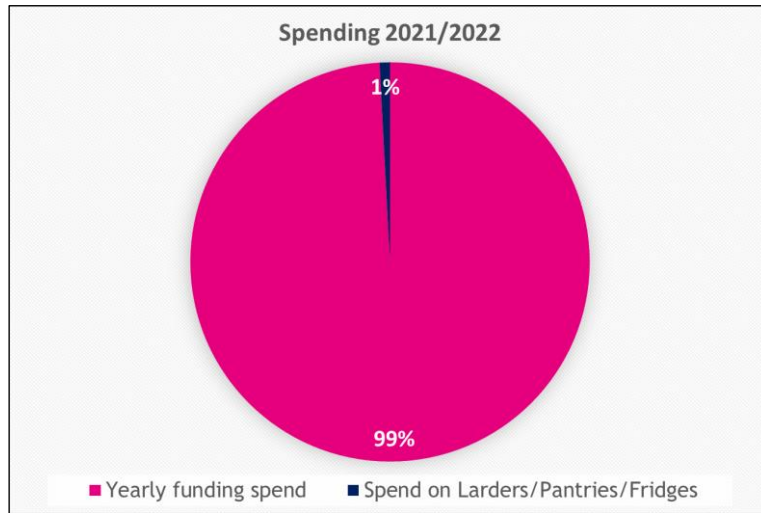- ❖ *Sustainability and the ongoing development of pantries*

Statistical Overview

To give a brief overview of our funding towards these types of projects, we have pulled some data from our Grant Management System (GMS). Between 2021-2023 (calculated up to December 23), we spent approximately **£2,622,965.52** on projects entailing the establishment or upkeep of a community pantry, larder or fridge.[2] Across our programmes, we have seen a concerted rise in applications addressing food insecurity through different means. This increase is reflected in the statistics:

- In the 21/22 financial year, we dedicated **£430,134** to pantries/larders/fridges.
- In 22/23, the figure had risen to **£1,401,565.86**, representing a **225.84% increase**.
- In the 23/24 financial year thus far (calculated up to December 2023), we have spent **£714,156** on such projects, with 4 months still to go. We will recalculate the numbers at the end of the financial year and compare against.

The above statistics are indicative of both the rising food insecurity across Scotland aforementioned above, as well as the emergence of new community-led approaches to tackle this issue head on, and in a more environmentally conscious way.

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[2] It is worth noting that these calculations were based off our GMS 'tagging' system; this means the projects which contained the words 'pantry', 'fridges' and 'larders' in their title or description. This means it might not contain every single project, but the most part. The data contains all of the place teams, including Scotland-wide projects. It also contains all of our ordinary and cost-of-living funding streams, including Community Anchors.

Spending 2021/2022

1%

99%

■ Yearly funding spend   ■ Spend on Larders/Pantries/Fridges

Spending 2022/2023

2%

98%

■ Yearly funding spend   ■ Spend on Larders/Pantries/Fridges

SPEND IN FINANCIAL YEAR ON PANTRIES/LARDERS/FRIDGES

23/24

22/23

21/22

£0   £200,000   £400,000   £600,000   £800,000   £1,000,000   £1,200,000   £1,400,000   £1,600,000

■ Spend in financial year

The Dignity Approach

The existing literature and work around alternative models to addressing food insecurity has made a strong case for the dignified approach to food insecurity. This approach entails: involving people with a direct experience of food insecurity in decision-making; recognising the social value of food; providing opportunities for contribution; and leaving people with the power to choose (Nourish Scotland, 2018). The concern for dignity also arises from the idea that foodbanks do not leave much room for choice or agency, and that they often struggle to cater for dietary, cultural or religious needs. The pantry staff that we spoke to all communicated that dignity is key to their values as an organisation. Perhaps most significantly, the approach has been well-received by members of the pantry. The dignified approach has opened the door to those who wouldn't have previously accessed a foodbank, nor felt that a foodbank was 'for them'. Removing the stigma attached to food poverty, or at least attempting to, has seen more community members accessing community food and coming into the pantry membership fold.

We must caveat here that those using foodbanks should not be further stigmatised because of this increased focus on dignity; with food insecurity perpetually on the rise, all approaches to emergency food should be respected and recognised for both their impacts and efforts. However, genuinely implementing the values of dignity – manifest in community consultation, choice a small financial contribution to the pantry and the membership model – has clearly been 'successful' for the pantries we spoke to, enabling them to reach the wider community. [3]

The Success of Pantry Plus: Beyond Food

In the pilot projects established with the Fund in 2020 and beyond, the pantries adopted a 'beyond food' model, also referred to as 'pantry plus'.[4] Historically, the Fund has not provided grants for food alone and, therefore, prior to granting awards to the pantries referred to here, the Fund stipulated that the pantries were to offer holistic wraparound services alongside food provision. The additional services implemented by pantries have included, but are not limited to, social security/welfare support; financial advice; family/adult support; energy advice; creative classes such as sewing or woodwork; community cooking classes. The wraparound offerings of community pantries tend to be designed based off community consultation. Whilst this was a precondition for receiving funding, it is worth noting that the 'beyond food' or 'pantry plus' model is already embedded into the pantry model itself, in fact a defining feature. On their website, TSPN record their mission areas, two of which include: 'advancement of education by increasing access to skills, training and employment prospects in relation to developing and running a

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[3] I consciously placed the term 'successful' in inverted commas since, as the research indicated, we must be cautious not to unintentionally celebrate food insecurity and wider poverty. It is, however, still great that projects are reaching the wider community.

[4] The pantry plus model refers to the establishment of a community pantry (shop) alongside holistic wraparound services/provision which can include financial advice, energy support, creative classes, cooking lessons, family support, and more. The model is intended to encourage more people to access support which will help them through financial difficult and social isolation, whilst augmenting community bonds.

local pantry' and 'relief for those in need by providing access to key support such as money advice, credit unions, housing, health, and employment skills' (TSPN, no date).

A further positive outcome of the holistic wraparound model is that it has seen community members who previously might not have accessed this additional provision making use of it after shopping in the pantry. Examples in the research included struggling families accessing adult support services that they had been made aware of through shopping at the pantry, or pantry shoppers newly accessing the financial / welfare advice services which have become a part of the bread and butter of the pantry model. This can also be partly attributed to pantry staff and coordinators who often recognise when someone might be in need of support beyond food, and thus will actively signpost those pantry members to additional forms of provision, supporting them throughout the process. The success of the 'plus' services was rarely in question throughout our research. In fact, in some cases the 'plus' element of the model has been easier to operate than the food provision, where issues around stock are commonplace (more on this later). Furthermore, the uptake of a variety creative and educational classes is forging new community relationships and aiding communities in building greater resilience whilst they continue to navigate growing financial security. As noted above, this is also contingent on pantry staff and coordinators acknowledging the need for support amongst pantry members; in turn, pantries might hire staff based on their experience in supporting communities through hardship. Finally, community consultation is at the heart of the 'beyond food' element of the pantry model – enabling members to have a say in what kind of additional provision they would like to see – and should remain so moving forward.

The Sustainability of the Model

Whilst building community resilience comprises a part of the move toward a solution, staff from across the pantries asserted that wider structural change is absolutely necessary. The very fact that emergency food aid, in its different manifestations, is expanding is indicative of the growing impacts of structural policymaking at the local and national level. This relates to the third theme to have emerged out of the research: the sustainability and longevity of the pantry model. Whilst membership numbers have increased and community bonds have mostly flourished, there is understandable levels of caution around celebrating the 'success' of the pantries. [5] Heightened pantry usage model is reflective of mounting food insecurity across our communities, and this complicates the perception of 'success'.

The very root of the 'growth' and 'success' experienced by pantries across Scotland tends to be destitution and the inevitable outcomes of structural impediments including a continual fall in wages, public service cuts, increased house/rental prices, an inadequate social security system and heightened in-work poverty driven in part by the rise in casualised work, all of which have been exacerbated throughout the more recent cost-of-living crisis.

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[5] It is worth noting that we had feedback from one pantry that despite the forming of community bonds, there had been some community tensions – including racial tensions – arise in the pantry queues. This was ascribed to the scarcity of stock and consequent 'competition' amongst the community. Pantry staff intervened in this case, but this is something which needs to be monitored closely moving forward.

Whilst the pantry model intends to reach the wider community beyond those in destitution, our conversations indicated that the majority of those currently using the pantries do so based on need. Moreover, it was noted by one participant that pantry shoppers continue to supplement their weekly pantry visit with foodbank parcels. In a 2021 report Trussell Trust noted that 95% of people referred to foodbanks in 2020 were destitute, reflective of trends across the community and emergency food sector (Trusell Trust, 2021, p.10). As the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) have argued, emergency food, whether it's made up of surplus or not, 'cannot possibly address the root causes of food poverty' (IFAN, 2021). Thus, emergency food aid can be seen as a sticking plaster or short-term solution to problems which require large-scale structural intervention and should not be regarded as substitute for this.

Turning to the practical side of sustainability, the situation is varied. Many pantries, both old and new, are increasingly concerned about stock, investment, and funding. Perhaps the most significant issue here is stock; as pantries proliferate across the country, the stock concurrently diminishes. Most pantries in Scotland pay a subscription to FareShare and rely on FareShare's surplus food for their stock each week. Certain pantries will supplement this with buying stock from local grocers, or receiving donations, although this is not equal across the board. FareShare are doing excellent work but, unsurprisingly, participants informed us that they are unable to regularly keep pace with the proliferation of community alternatives including pantries. Thus, as demand increases, stock depletes. This means some pantries can only open for a limited time per week. One potential solution here is the consideration of community ownership and community management. Our research indicated that the pantries which have progressed toward a form of community ownership, such as a community development trust, are more confident about the longevity (and in turn, sustainability) of their work moving forward. However, patience, commitment, and external support is necessary to create the fertile conditions to move toward community ownership.

As it stands, while the larger systemic status quo remains unchanged, pantries may continue in the short-to-medium turn to rely on third sector streams of funding as they continue to establish themselves and consider pathways to community ownership. The Scottish Government has also committed to investing around £10 million per year to local organisations tackling poverty and inequality through the Investing in Communities Fund (2023-2026). This will include organisations 'tackling food insecurity' (Tackling Child Poverty and Social Justice Directorate, 2023, p.14). Amidst the current climate, pantries are becoming integral to the survival of communities across Scotland, but this should not dilute the argument (and the need) for greater public investment, debt relief, an increase in wages in line with the heightening cost of living and a strengthened social security system (Fitzpatrick et al, 2023).

Conclusions

This short briefing has explored two key strands of research relating to the pantry model: (1) dignity and community support beyond food and (2) the sustainability and ongoing development of pantries. Considering the framework of 'dignity', community pantries represent a progressive approach to addressing food insecurity, entailing increased levels of community participation and contribution, whilst also enhancing choice and agency. It is worth noting, however, that the notion of choice diminishes when pantries struggle to

secure enough stock to meet rapidly rising demand within their respective communities. The question of stock, particularly the of consistency of stock, must be addressed as we continue to monitor the sustainability and longevity of the pantry model. Pantries require patience, commitment and dedication as they continue to expand and community ownership models continue to be experimented with. Pantries, especially those with well-resourced wraparound services and provision, are becoming pillars of the communities that they operate in. Consequently, public and third-sector investment in pantries has certainly been a worthwhile endeavour up to this point.

See next page for bibliography.

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