Nottingham Trent University

Using Customer Personas to Expand More-than-Food Support

A case study of the Meadows Food Pantry in Nottingham - Policy Paper

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Abbreviations

LSOA	Lower Super Output Area
MFP	Meadows Food Pantry
NHS	National Health Service
ONS	Office for National Statistics

1. Introduction and findings

Our study developed detailed profiles of customers who attend the food pantry in the 'Meadows' neighbourhood of Nottingham. The pantry had been operating for six months, and the volunteer managers wanted to evaluate the impact of the pantry on the local community and the potential to expand the services, including more-than-food support. The project was conducted in close collaboration with the Meadows Food Pantry (MFP), which is located within the Bridgeway Hall Methodist Mission. The Bridgeway Centre is in a lower-layer super output area (LSOA), which has one of the highest risks of food insecurity nationwide (Smith et al 2022). This LSOA is in the top 10% for food insecurity risk (ranking 31,939th out of 33,755 similar zones).[1] Hence, the pantry may not only be an important food source for those who are otherwise ineligible for food bank referrals; it may potentially serve as a multiservice hub for supporting people out of poverty and food insecurity.

The evaluation had two parts:

1. We **used a South Australian framework**, which defines the key elements of social supermarket (SSM) provision (Pettman et al., 2023) **to benchmark the food pantry's structure and operation** against a framework of evidence-based good practice.
2. Based on quantitative and qualitative data relating to **Meadows Food Pantry customers**, we developed characterisations of different user types, which we called '**personas**'. These personas aim to help the pantry **design and tailor more-than-food support** for different groups of customers.

The data was based on a survey of 38 food pantry customers and observations of the researchers and volunteers (one of the researchers was also a volunteer). The surveys were actually undertaken as semi-structured interviews which were conducted by three members of the research team, including the pantry volunteer. The data from these 38 testimonials were then synthesised and analysed to craft 4 'typical' customer personas.

The personas describe Maureen (local woman), Vincent (local man), Halima (new arrival from overseas) and Diane (local woman), in terms of their socio-demographic profile, economic and food security status and their sense of community and wellbeing. In addition, we profiled their use of food support, including current and previous use of food banks, their use of the pantry, their motivation for attending and the impact the

[1] The mapped data can be viewed at https://mylocalmap.org.uk/iaahealth/. The ranking is based on the 'Food Insecurity Risk Index 2022-23: Composition with Stores Rank.'

pantry has on their ability to feed themselves and on their sense of wellbeing. We also asked respondents if they would like additional support from the Food Pantry.

Summary of findings

Our key findings demonstrate the food pantry's impact on wellbeing and social capital, as well as its potential to engage people in more-than-food services:

1	The **majority of customers** at the food pantry (60%) **have not used a food bank in the last six months** (a food bank is also located at the Bridgeway Centre), but 9 out of 10 customers (89%) say they are anxious about obtaining sufficient food each week
2	We found that the experience of customers at the Meadows Food Pantry in Nottingham **validated many aspects of the South Australian Model** for best-practice food relief at social supermarket (SSMs). The main difference between the two approaches was the **comprehensive wraparound services** seen in the Australian model, which have yet to be developed in the Meadows.
3	As the South Australian Model predicted, the approach in the Meadows did facilitate **choice, access and a sense of dignity** among customers accessing food aid. The project enhanced **social capital and personal wellbeing**. In addition, the majority of customers said they would welcome **more support in terms of courses and activities** (e.g., cooking classes and other opportunities). Since the survey was conducted, a number of customers have become volunteers. It would be interesting to assess the impact of this for those individuals in terms of social capital, wellbeing and moving people closer to employment.
4	Our creation of customer personas has allowed us to **capture the characteristics and experiences of different groups**, the impact of the food pantry on their lives (including food security, wellbeing and social capital), and the support and activities they would be interested in accessing. This can facilitate the identification of place-based interventions which are highlighted in the Australian model and other studies. By focusing on customer types, we should pick up differences in place, since clients vary depending on the social-demographic make-up of the area in which they are located.
5	Our findings can **inform the debate in Nottingham** about how to best tackle the city's food insecurity crisis through a system of place-based food relief and more-than-food services.

2. What we know: food insecurity levels and the role of SSMs

Growing levels of food insecurity

Food insecurity in the UK has increased dramatically since the pandemic and it remains high (13.9% of households were classed as 'food insecure' in December 2024), driven by a cost-of-living crisis (Food Foundation 2024a and b). National statistics reveal that changes in the rates of food insecurity have closely followed shifts in food, drink and household energy prices—in particular, since they began to escalate in 2021/22 (ONS 2024b).

These increases took a heavy toll on households that were reliant on low incomes or had financial vulnerabilities pushing them into severe (very low) and moderate (low) food insecurity (Food Foundation 2024c). While inflation rates have declined since 2022/23, in many cases the price rises have remained locked in, and people are paying more for goods and services now than they were at the beginning of 2021 (Food Foundation 2024b and c; ONS 2024b).

In Nottingham, residents were already extremely vulnerable to financial shocks and crises prior to the cost-of-living crisis. They were considered to be the poorest people in the country since gross disposable household income (GDHI) per head in Nottingham was just £13,952 in 2020, the lowest figure among local authority areas nationwide (Hartley 2023). The latest statistics (for 2022) suggest Nottingham remains one of the poorest local authority areas in UK - it is now ranked third from bottom in the GDHI league table (ONS 2024a). It is not surprising, therefore, that the local population reports very high levels of food insecurity. A survey of 1000 city residents undertaken on behalf of the Nottingham Financial Resilience Partnership (NFRP) in March 2024 found that 39% of respondents described reducing or skipping meals in the previous week (this figure was shared by NFRP with the authors in a communication exchange). As noted above, the Meadows Food Pantry is located in a LSOA that is in the highest decile for food insecurity risk nationwide (Smith et al. 2022).

Many Nottingham residents have lived precarious lives over a number of years. Low levels of social mobility (Social Mobility and Poverty Commission 2016) indicate that residents become mired in poverty and, hence, they remain vulnerable to shocks and crises that can force them into food insecurity at any time.

Growth in food pantries

Current research on SSMs, such as food pantries and food clubs, has uncovered the growth and reasons for their use, their benefits, not only reducing food insecurity but also boosting dignity, wellbeing and social capital:

Food pantries, 'food clubs' or 'social supermarkets' tend to **differ from food banks**, in terms of the payment for food; the choice available to customers; access to an affordable, retail environment; and, in some cases, the presence of social support and 'wraparound' services that benefit clients (Pettman et al 2023; Booth et al. 2018; Saxena 2018).

Food pantries are seen by customers as offering '**access, dignity and choice**' with respect to food, according to Ranta et al (2024). The dignity afforded to SSM customers and the agency experienced by them are considered key not only to clients' decisions to attend, but also the **potential for these facilities to promote social capital** (Ranta et al 2024; Booth et al 2018, Pettman et al 2023).

Food pantry use is **increasing and is now more prevalent than food bank usage**, according to the Food and You 2 Survey, conducted by the Food Standards Agency. The survey, which measures consumers' self-reported knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to food, found 5% of respondents had used a pantry in the previous 12 months, compared to 4% who had used a Food Bank (Armstrong et al. 2024).

Food pantry **customers are more likely** to (Armstrong et al. 2024; Mulrooney et al. 2023):

- be on low incomes;
- be long-term unemployed or have never worked;
- have children under 16 years of age and experience very low or low food security (Armstrong et al. 2024);
- have a disability;
- be single, separated or widowed;
- and have three or more dependents.

Research which surveyed members of the *Your Local Pantry* network across the UK found that **97% of respondents highlighted improved household finances** (with savings on average £21 per shop). But there was also a **significant more- than-food dividend**: 83% said attending the pantry was good for their mental health; 74% felt "more connected to their local community", and 63% said they were eating more fresh fruit and vegetables (Aitchison et al 2024).

SSMs have the **potential to address food insecurity and foster the creation of social capital** at individual and community levels (Stettin et al 2022), which may support pathways out of poverty and social exclusion (Pettman et al 2023). To achieve this, SSMs **require careful planning**, which encompasses the business model, social content, local needs and includes a long-term vision (Saxena and Tornaghi, 2018).

3. The Meadows Food Pantry and its customers

The Food Pantry is based in the Bridgeway Hall Methodist Mission in the Bridgeway Centre in the Meadows area of Nottingham. It is part of the Your Local Pantry network, which includes over 120 outlets. The Meadows Food Pantry (MFP) was launched in Autumn 2023. At the time this study was conducted it had recruited 110 member customers. To register at the Food Pantry, customers should live within the local area and are asked to complete a short questionnaire with a volunteer. No referral is required.

The Meadows Food Pantry charges registered members a flat fee of £5 to shop each week. This typically secures goods that would command a retail price of £25 in a mainstream supermarket. The opening hours coincide with the opening of a community cafe on the same site, which offers cups of tea and pastries free of charge. The pantry operates from a small, dedicated shop space within a Methodist church and community centre. It is supported by 13 volunteers, six of whom are pantry members. A maximum of four shoppers can be accommodated at one time, so other customers await their turn in the café. People are called in the order in which they arrive at the Pantry.

The shop supplies a wide range of ambient products, including branded breakfast cereals, chocolate, biscuits, tinned and jarred goods, and other staples. There is a selection of high-quality frozen and chilled products, plus fresh fruit, vegetables and bread. Hygiene and cleaning products and household items are also available. The main suppliers are Fareshare, His Church, Inkind, SOS wholesale, Food Warehouse and local supermarkets.

The pantry had been in operation for six months when our research team surveyed 38 customers. One of the researchers was also a volunteer at the pantry. The surveys were undertaken as semi-structured interviews which were conducted by three members of the research team, including the pantry volunteer. The data from these 38 testimonials were then synthesised and analysed to craft 4 ‘typical’ customer personas. We checked these personas against the observations of the volunteers and researchers, who spent time at the food pantry. The pantry is one of several food relief activities offered at Bridgeway Hall, which also include a food bank, social eating and cafe.

Demographic profiles of MFP customers

Sex/gender	• Customers at the Meadows Food Pantry are far more likely to be women, than men.
Age	• Typically from 18 to 65 plus, with the modal age being 35 to 49 years.
Ethnicity	• 50% of survey respondents described themselves as White and one third as Black (mostly of African descent). • Those born elsewhere have UK citizenship or 'leave to remain,' with exception of one person, who was an asylum seeker.
Employment and income	• Only 2 in 10 people were in paid employment. • Income sources included employment, employment benefits, out of work benefits and a mix of benefits and pension. • Respondents generally reported their incomes to be steady during the last six months, but the increasing cost of living was a universal problem, with utility and food bills the principal concern, followed by rent, transport, child care costs and debt repayments.
Health	• Half reported a long-term health conditionor disability.
Education	• 3 in 10 people had no formal qualifications, but 4 in 10 said they had A-levels, diploma, degree or a postgraduate qualification.
Household composition and living conditions	• Around 6 in 10 people were single (single, divorced, separated, widowed), and a similar proportion reported they lived with family members, e.g., children. • About 6 in 10 people also lived in social housing, with the remainder split between private renting and/or home ownership.
Proximity to pantry	• They almost all live in or close to the neighbourhood.

Experiences of food insecurity and pantry use among MFP customers

The majority of respondents indicated that the pantry plays an important role in their lives, including in terms of food security, wellbeing and social capital.

9 out of 10 people agreed they came to the MFP because they could not afford enough food for the week, and almost everyone said (95%) that coming to the pantry helped them feel less anxious about obtaining the food they need.

6 out of 10 people indicated the MFP makes up more than half of their weekly shop.

9 out of 10 people agree they like the MFP because they can meet and talk to people (7 out of 10 strongly agree).

Among customers, there is a very strong attachment to the local community and the MFP itself.

Overall, the customers displayed a lower level of wellbeing compared to the general population (ONS 2024c).[2] As noted below, however, the sense of wellbeing varies among different groups of customers.

In addition, there is evidence to show the Meadows Food Pantry boosts the sense of wellbeing (and social capital) among customers. For example, 9 out of 10 people (89%) agreed that 'coming to the pantry gives me a boost and makes me feel better in myself.'

Food insecurity profile of MFP customers

Typically, respondents have low incomes and experience low food insecurity:

- **6 out of 10 demonstrated very low (45%) or low (15%) food security**, i.e., they reduce or skip meals and sometimes go a whole day without eating because they cannot afford enough food.
- **7 out of 10 reported a very low income**, below £270 per week, placing them in the bottom decile for household income.
- **9 in 10** agreed they came to the MFP because they **could not afford enough food** for the week.

[2] For example, MFP customers are less happy than the average citizen (with a mean score of 6.7 out of 10, compared with 7.3/10 nationwide). Scores for life satisfaction are also lower (6.0/10 compared with 7.5/10), while on average they display a higher 'anxiety score' of 4.6/10 (compared with 3.2/10).

Four personas of MFP customers

The data from 38 testimonials were synthesised and analysed to craft 4 'typical' customer personas. The personas describe Maureen (local woman), Vincent (local man), Halima (new arrival from overseas) and Diane (local woman), in terms of their socio-demographic profile, economic and food security status and their sense of community and wellbeing.

Each of the personas are 'pen portraits' of typical customers; they do not describe any individual. They recount an authentic story grounded in place and belonging, with a shared lived experience of food insecurity, which may be experienced in dissimilar ways. While each persona represents ideal-typical groups who may come from varied backgrounds and life situations, their experience of food insecurity and the financial, nutritional and social benefits they receive from visiting the MFP are broadly similar. However, their future outlook and wider support needs may differ considerably.

Table 1 - Maureen persona

Maureen: Local Woman (n=12)
Maureen has lived in the Meadows for many years. She is likely to live with some of her teenage children in a council house or social housing. She may also have older children, who have moved out, but still live nearby along with other family. Maureen is middle aged. She is not in paid employment. Like many of her friends she has few formal qualifications. She feels unable to take a job at the moment because of a long-term health problem and she claims out-of-work benefits. Maureen budgets carefully to ensure she has £5 available for the Pantry each week and to provide support for her family. Maureen may not consider herself a great cook, but she knows how to fill her family up. Her household income is very low. In addition, Maureen has been hit hard by rising prices. Like her peers at the Pantry, increasing energy and food bills have had the biggest impact, but transport costs and interest on her debts have also gone up. Maureen has attended the food bank from time to time when she and her family have needed a boost. She still goes, but the frequency of her food bank visits has declined since she found the Pantry. Maureen heard about the Pantry from a friend and someone at the food bank, who gave her a leaflet. She came because it is hard to pay the bills and afford enough food these days. She now comes every week and typically she buys around half of her weekly shop. She says the pantry has helped her obtain enough to eat and she can buy some products that would otherwise be unaffordable. However, Maureen strongly agrees that the chance to meet people and talk is also an important part of visiting the Pantry. She loves to have a cup of tea and pastries. She

may not have a close circle of friends at the Pantry, but there is always a familiar face and someone to talk to. Besides, the volunteers are friendly and chatty, too.

Maureen has very low food security. She will reduce or skip meals to make ends meet and occasionally will go a day without eating. She would say the Pantry has helped her to obtain enough food and she can buy some food she could not otherwise afford.

Among Maureen's peers at the Pantry are other women, many of whom were born in Nottingham or the Meadows and who also have children. Most of them are single, but they live with family. Maureen may be interested in doing courses at the Bridgeway Centre, depending on what they are.

Sometimes Maureen and her friends feel embarrassed about going to the Pantry. However, once in the building she admits that the Pantry gives her a boost and helps her to feel more positive about herself. She appreciates this because she sometimes feels anxious and her satisfaction with her life is not very high. She does not feel particularly hopeful about the future, either, but she thinks that her children make her life worthwhile.

Table 2 - Vincent persona

Vincent: Local Man (n=9)
Vincent has lived in Nottingham for a long time and he now lives in the Meadows, where he typically has a council house or social rent. He lives alone. He may have children, but he does not see them regularly. Vincent feels attached to the neighbourhood, where he sees lots of familiar faces every day. Vincent is retired after a lifetime of work and he receives a small pension. He doesn't have a lot of formal qualifications, but he has a lifetime of experiences and knowledge. Vincent prides himself on his self-reliance, which includes decent cooking skills. Typically, Vincent can make a little go a long way, but it's still very hard to make ends meet. He is in the lowest decile for household income nationwide. Unfortunately, his money has not been sufficient to keep up with the rising cost of living, in particular the price of food and energy. As a result, he demonstrates very low food security, and he admits he cuts and skips meals when he is short of cash; sometimes he may go for a whole day without eating. Vincent has not attended the food bank, but he does come to the food pantry every week. He heard about it from a friend. Initially, his motivation was financial and after the first visit it was a no brainer for him to come and shop at the Pantry, because he can purchase so much for his fiver. He carefully puts the money aside each week. He likes to pay his way, he always has done, and he is very impressed by the quality and variety of food he can buy. A number of Vincent's friends also experience very low food security

and they have attended the food bank, although the frequency of those visits has declined a little since they too found the Pantry. A few others are getting by, but they all agree they could not afford enough to eat if it was not for the discounted food they obtain there. The local men, many of them white, but not exclusively, often sit together and have a cup of tea while waiting for their turn in the pantry.

Vincent's health is not great, and in particular, his mental health may be fragile. He does not share his worries, but if asked directly, he might admit he is not very happy or satisfied with his life. Sometimes he does not think things in his life are particularly worthwhile and he is not very hopeful for the future.

However, he enjoys coming to the Pantry and benefits from the social side of the shop. At the Pantry, Vincent likes to sit with a group of other local men. The group often choose a time when the café and shop are a bit quieter and they enjoy chatting with the volunteers and each other over a cup of tea and a cake. Pantry visits give them a boost and help them feel better about themselves. Vincent and his friends are not likely to ask for additional help or support from the Pantry. In fact, they say they are not very interested in doing courses.

Table 3 - Halima persona

Halima: New Arrival (n=12)
Halima typically arrived in the UK from her home overseas. She came to the country with her husband and children and the family may now have UK citizenship and live together in a rented house in the Meadows. Despite settling here in recent years and lacking confidence in her English, Halima, who is in her 30s or 40s, feels connected to the community through her children's school, the local library, the church and now the Pantry. Halima's household income is in the lowest decile for household income in the UK. Her husband works, but shifts are irregular and the pay is not very good. The work is precarious, varying from week to week. The family rely on a mix of wages and benefits. Halima is a capable cook, but for her and her peers the money coming in is simply not enough to buy sufficient food for the family. The increase in food and energy costs is a particular problem, but also the rising expense of rent, child care and transport. As a result, Halima, like many of her friends, is experiencing very low food security. Her good cooking skills help to stretch what they have, but even so she may have to cut the size of her meals, skips meals and sometimes may not eat for a whole day. Halima agrees that without the Pantry she would not be able to buy enough food to eat. Typically, Halima heard about the Pantry from a friend and, since she discovered it, despite an initial twinge of embarrassment at visiting a food charity, she has come every

week. The biggest impact of the Pantry on her life is financial. Halima finds it is a relief to come and stock up for just five pounds. More than half of the food Halima buys each week, sometimes up to three-quarters, comes from the Pantry. She and her friends agree that having access to the shop has reduced the anxiety they feel about being able to buy enough food for the week. In addition, the Pantry allows Halima to buy foods her children like, such as chocolate spread or breakfast cereal, which she simply could not afford in a regular supermarket. And she can turn the free veg on offer at the Pantry into nutritious meals for the week.

While Halima highlights the financial impact of the Pantry as the principal benefit, she and all her friends agree that they feel a boost when they attend the shop and cafe, which makes them feel better in themselves. Halima might sit with a group of other women, who have also come to the UK. They are mostly a similar age, married with children and live in the Meadows in a mix of council and private-rented housing. They enjoy chatting with a cup of tea and a pastry in the café, while they await their turn in the shop. They all feel like they belong at the Pantry.

Halima and her friends are not in paid work, but they may like to be. They are busy looking after the children and making ends meet, but they are fit and healthy with a relatively high level of education. Some have obtained the equivalent of A-levels in their own country or did a diploma, but they are concerned the qualifications may not be recognised or perhaps respected in the UK. Halima would love to do some courses through the Bridgeway Centre to improve her English and increase her chances of gaining paid employment. She would also like to learn more about food and diet to help her feed her family and she would love to share her own knowledge at the centre.

Despite the challenges she is facing, Halima and her friends tend to be optimistic about their life in the UK. She has someone to rely on if there is a serious problem, she feels part of the community and she has things in her life she feels are worthwhile. She is more satisfied with her life compared with the average person, and she is also happier and more hopeful.

Table 4 - Diane persona

Diane: Local Woman (n=1)
Diane, who is British-born, white and middle-aged, lives with her husband and children in their own home in Nottingham. Over the years, they have had many struggles with securing stable accommodation and Diane and her husband were homeless at the time that their children were born. She does not feel that she really belongs to her neighbourhood or local community and has a strained relationship with their neighbours.

Diane has also had to juggle various compounding pressures, especially since one of her children struggled with mental health as a teenager. Diane had to take on considerable social care responsibilities which affected her job stability. When her husband was also injured at work, it fell to her to support the family financially. Although Diane is self-employed and runs a small business, she and her family rely primarily on a mix of social benefits and a very low household income. Things have become more settled now, but their benefits have been reduced.

Diane visits the food pantry on a weekly basis (sometimes bringing her teenage daughter with her) and also visits the food bank regularly. The food pantry fulfils purely a functional need for Diane, providing access to food she would not otherwise be able to afford. She sees it as good value for money, and she likes that she can choose her own food.

Although she can see that the food pantry and café also offer a friendly and relaxed atmosphere and social space for people, she is not there to meet and talk to other people and does not feel that the pantry is a community where she belongs. The fact that she is running her own business makes it difficult to take time to sit at the café, as she explains, ‘taking time out to sit here is a big deal.’

However, the pantry does make her feel less anxious about obtaining enough food to eat each week. Nevertheless, she still has very low life satisfaction and high levels of anxiety. She worries about running out of food and often (on a monthly basis) cuts meal sizes or skips meals for a whole day. Though she would like to eat more healthy and balanced meals, with current food costs, she feels that ‘any food is good food rather than not having anything.’

Diane is not interested in getting any additional training or skills-development. She explains that she has all the training and education she needs, but there aren’t employment opportunities providing adequate income for her to apply such skills.

4. What we have learned from the personas: Lessons for food pantry managers and policymakers

Our study demonstrates the positive impact of the Meadows Food Pantry on customers in terms of food relief and diet, but also beyond food and it illustrates the value of the South Australia Model. The Model sets out a framework for the development of a successful SSM/food pantry (Pettman et al 2023). Within this framework there are various requirements, which include:

- Open access
- Adequate provision of nutritious food
- Opportunity to pay for a variety of food of your own choosing
- Positive social environment that promotes interactions between customers, volunteers, staff and other agencies/organisations
- Opportunities to volunteer
- Activities that enable people to (re)connect with food
- Access to support and services that can assist people in terms of mental health, skills, employment

We have used the South Australia Model "rubric" (scoring system) to compare it with the operation of the Meadows Food Pantry below.

Table 5 – Benchmarking the Meadows Food Pantry

Benchmarking the Meadows Food Pantry: A Comparison with the South Australia Model			
Domain	**Element**	**Description**	**Meadows Pantry**
Food Grocery & Provision	Dignified provision of affordable food and groceries	Consistent offer Variety/choice Retail style Welcoming/friendly	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
	Nutritious	Follows Nutritional Standards	✓
Organisational model	Organisational goals, principles, and values	Mission/values Dignity/respect/ empowerment	✓ ✓
Sustainability/ viability	Sustainability/viability	Financial security	✓
	Enduring partnerships	Formal links to partners Advocacy	✓
	Organisational workforce/capacity	Funded staff Volunteer roles, Leadership capacity	✓ ✓

	Volunteers form part of the workforce	People volunteer: (a)altruistic reasons, (b)clients and can increase skills informally/formally	 ✓ ✓
	Secure food/grocery supply	Subsidized surplus and/or purchased wholesale	✓
	Continuous improvement and service quality	Use data: (a)Client voice (b)Volunteer engagement, induction, training, and review	 ✓ ✓
Target Groups: Customers Volunteers	Membership model or open access	Defined group Open access plus targeting to reach unemployed, underemployed, retirees, people on disability pension, and low-income earners	
Pathways out of food insecurity/ social services	Social connection Access to wrap-around supports, services, and referral pathways Opportunities for learning and skill development Reconnection with food	Informal/formal socialization and dedicated space (e.g., café, space for programs) Partnerships/ processes that enable clients to engage with the critical services they require (e.g., mental health, employment, microfinance) Volunteering/work experience tailored to individual's needs, and desired skills/ experience Variety of activities that build confidence and competence (e.g. cooking classes, community kitchens, growing food, meal packs)	✓

The positive impact of the Meadows Food Pantry appears to endorse several aspects of the South Australia Model. However, the pantry is still in the early stages of its operation, and the model also highlights areas where it could develop further. We have reflected on the impact of the Meadows Food Pantry on agency, dignity, social capital, personal wellbeing of customers and the pathways out of food insecurity and poverty available to them in this setting. The provision of food is vital, but also a catalyst for

positive engagement with people, who are trapped in poverty of which low food insecurity is just one aspect.

Benchmarking takeaways

Choice, Access, Agency and Dignity: Our study confirmed that customers felt they had access to the service and a high level of choice of food. The results implied a sense of dignity and agency among customers, which is consistent with other research (Aitchison et al 2024). Some 37% of respondents felt some embarrassment at attending the pantry that is worthy of further investigation. Anecdotally, some people mentioned this occurred when they had arrived early and queued outside waiting for the pantry to open. This is managed by informing customers that stock is spread throughout the session, so there is little advantage in arriving early.

Social capital: Social capital displayed by Meadows Food Pantry users is high on some key measures, in terms of bonding (within groups), bridging (between groups) and linking (vertical connections to people in positions of power). For example, 90 to 97% of respondents said they felt they belonged when they came to the pantry, were part of a local community, had the opportunity to meet and talk to people when they attended and made good connections with the people who run the pantry. The South Australia models shows that support services are the mechanism through which engaged customers can be empowered to pursue a path out of food insecurity and poverty. It is exciting to think that the introduction of those services could have a positive impact in the Meadows.

Personal wellbeing: Around 9 out of 10 respondents agree they feel a boost and less anxious when they visit the pantry. It is encouraging that this food aid setting can help people to feel better about themselves. As our filtered data showed, some groups display much higher levels of personal wellbeing than others, creating the possibility of tailoring support for particular needs using personas. Respondents summarised in the 'Halima' persona (new arrivals) report high scores to describe their hope for the future and happiness and report a low score for anxiety. In contrast, respondents summarised in all other personas - excluding Halima (new arrivals) - recorded low scores for life satisfaction, hopefulness and happiness, along with a high level of anxiety.

Promoting pathways out of poverty: The South Australia Model highlights the importance of activities and support to build social capital and wellbeing, as well as developing pathways out of food insecurity. If the support on offer extends beyond welfare advice and debt management to include activities to help people move closer to the labour market, this approach could be extended into a 'pathway out of poverty'. Attitudes towards the food pantry and those who run it are very positive, and this will

likely be important in encouraging people to accept support, embark on courses or undertake activities.

Volunteering and activities: The model also highlights reciprocity and the importance of 'giving back,' since it supports the development of (bonding, bridging and linking) social capital, builds even greater trust and enables the development of skills (Pettman et al. 2023). The Meadows Food Pantry is at an early stage of its development and building in more support, tailored to the needs of different customer groups, which could assist them to embark on pathways out of food insecurity and poverty. There is an opportunity to encourage volunteering. Some six pantry (including four food bank) customers have now become volunteers. However, overall, the proportion of pantry customers volunteering appeared low among survey respondents (24% compared to national figures of 54%) (ONS 2024c). During the survey, some customers expressed an interest in participating in pantry activities (e.g. volunteering or taking part in group cooking activities). There may be scope to do even more to encourage volunteering within the MFP and wider community.

Using personas to envision and plan tailored support

By developing personas of different customer types at the Meadows Food Pantry, we can start to think about how support and activities could be tailored to bring maximum benefit to different groups. We can already identify commonalities among many people who visit the pantry, but there are also significantly different needs.

Table 6 - Tailoring more-than-food support to four personas

Personas	Income maximisation advice	Mental health support	Courses and employment	Activities and volunteering
Maureen (local women)	This group of local women may be interested in and benefit from some income maximisation advice (including welfare rights and debt) to ease their financial situation.	Some mental health support may help them and enable them to consider taking part in some courses and activities, which would also enhance social contact—something they have enjoyed at the pantry.	Courses on budgeting, health and wellbeing and reading/writing as well as employment support may be attractive.	These women may be open to some cooking activities and some fun, interactive sessions with other customers could be just the thing.

Personas	Income maximisation advice	Mental health support	Courses and employment	Activities and volunteering
Vincent (local men)	This group of men would benefit from income maximisation advice since they struggle financially and may not be obtaining everything they are entitled to, e.g., pension credit. They are not actively looking for help so, if one has a good experience, it may encourage the others to try.	They are very unlikely to ask for mental health support but, if offered and encouraged, they may accept it and it could be highly beneficial.		The group do not feel they want any courses, but they may enjoy pursuing shared interests during their meetings at the cafe. Some of them would also like to share their knowledge of cooking, which they could do through a communal activity and bring benefit to others. Volunteering may give them a sense of purpose.

Personas	Income maximisation advice	Mental health support	Courses and employment	Activities and volunteering
Halima (new arrival)	This group would benefit from income maximisation and welfare rights advice. They have a complex challenge in that the household income is sometimes a combination of benefits and wages, which may be from precarious work, so it is not regular. In some cases, the women's husbands manage the household income so details are unclear, which would need to be addressed on an individual basis. This group may also welcome employment support.		This group would welcome English language classes and employment support. The latter might include an assessment of existing qualifications, so that they can pitch themselves at the correct level in the job market.	The group includes skilled cooks, but they have an interest to learn more and would welcome sessions on food and cooking. They also have a lot to offer and would like to share their cooking knowledge and expertise.

Personas	Income maximisation advice	Mental health support	Courses and employment	Activities and volunteering
Diane (local women)	This group of local women may be interested in and benefit from some income maximisation advice (including welfare rights and debt). They are likely to depend on a combination of benefits and wages, which may be from precarious work, so it is not regular. This group is also likely to be open to and benefit from entrepreneurial support, such as opportunities for business networking and marketing.	People in this group are very unlikely to ask for mental health support but, if offered and encouraged, they may accept it and it could be highly beneficial. Such support could also be beneficial if offered to family members.	This group would not be interested in further courses as they are likely to have had such exposure already. The challenge for this group is how such courses translate into real financial incomes (outcomes), i.e., in other words, stable living wages.	This group would not be interested in further for shared activities or volunteering opportunities, since they view the pantry primarily (if not only) in functional terms, i.e., to access affordable food to feed their family.

Conclusions

When evaluating different types of food aid support or considering future provision in Nottingham, our case study indicates that it would be more important to assess whether interventions provide dignity, security, wellbeing, social capital and pathways out of poverty for clients. It's not about the type of food relief services, but how additional support services provided alongside food relief can enhance wellbeing, social capital and economic security at individual and community levels.

The key principles of a comprehensive food support system are that it: (a) acts as a 'catalyst to developing individual and community resilience' (Saxena and Tornaghi 2018); and (b) is part of a larger community *system,* which can support people to address their immediate food needs and build social capital and wellbeing, in order to embark on a pathway out of food insecurity and poverty (Walker et al, 2025).

Finally, evidence-based customer personas can be one way to help inform the design of a comprehensive food support system by tailoring services best suited for certain customer types. A case in point is the Meadows Food Pantry, which is now applying the lessons from our study to reimagining more-than-food service provision at the shop.

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