

What is the impact of Your Local Pantry membership on food insecurity, dietary quality and well-being? A natural experiment evaluation

SALIENT – Your Local Pantry Evaluation Protocol

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Summary

What is already known?

Around 24% households in England experienced moderate to severe levels of food insecurity in 2023-2024. Food insecurity has multiple negative effects on diet quality, health, and mental wellbeing.

There has been an expansion of different types of community food projects in response to rising levels of food insecurity in the UK. One popular and rapidly expanding model is community food clubs (also referred to as social supermarkets, food pantries, community shops, among other names). Community food clubs, usually set up by not-for-profit or social enterprise organisations, offer low-cost membership fees and a retail shop like environment where members can purchase their own food at significantly lower costs compared to the mainstream retailers. Often these models aim to promote dignity and choice in comparison to perceived disadvantages of how food support is provided from food banks.

Reports from organisations operating these models suggest many benefits of membership including self-reported improvements in members' household finances, increased consumption of fruit and vegetables, and a positive effect on mental health. Social outcomes, such as having an opportunity to volunteer and feeling part of a community have also been emphasised. Academic studies of these models have included qualitative studies or surveys of users' experiences. However, challenges arising from an unreliable food supply due to a high reliance on surplus food redistribution have also been found.

What does this study add?

Outcome evaluations using methods that minimise the effects of bias and that generate an internally valid estimate of the effects of membership in community food clubs on food insecurity, mental health and nutrition outcomes are lacking. This study will be the first outcome evaluation, that, through using a natural experiment design, will obtain a causal estimate of the effects of membership in one community food club model (Your Local Pantry (YLP)) on these outcomes, namely, food insecurity, dietary quality, and mental well-being. It will also uniquely be accompanied by a process evaluation to understand mechanisms of impact and the nature of the intervention delivered across different YLP locations.

How will we do this?

When people apply to join a YLP food pantry, they either move directly into membership or experience some delay before being granted membership. The delay may be administrative or because they are placed on a waitlist where the pantries are over-subscribed for membership. This study will exploit the natural flow onto YLP membership and waiting lists to examine outcomes at 2, 6 and 10 weeks after membership application. Differences in the change in outcomes from baseline (no membership) will be compared between those who moved into membership and those who remain without membership. Using waiting times as a natural experiment allows us to estimate the causal effect of YLP membership. We will compare these causal estimates with estimates from a simple before-after design, comparing outcomes of participants after they obtain membership with outcomes of the same participants at the time of application, i.e. before obtaining membership. The primary outcome is food insecurity. Secondary outcomes include mental wellbeing, diet quality, financial hardship, loneliness and personal sense of dignity. Data collection will involve questionnaires administered online or over the phone. An accompanying process evaluation will include qualitative interviews with study participants at the end of 10-week follow-up period to understand experiences of membership and perceived impacts. Interviews with

pantry staff and volunteers will seek to understand mechanisms of impact and how these potentially vary across sites.

Background

Context

Household food insecurity, that is, insufficient and insecure access to food due to financial constraints, has been steadily rising in the UK population. Recent data from the Food Standards Agency's Food and You 2 survey collected between October 2023 to January 2024 revealed that 11% and 12% of the respondents experienced low and very low food security, and further 16% of the respondents experienced marginal food security (1). These levels of food insecurity are unprecedented, though even before the COVID-19 pandemic, about 20% of households were food insecure according to an earlier Food Standards Agency survey (2).

In response to rising levels of food insecurity, there has been steady expansion in the number and types of community food projects operating across England. These projects offer alternative and affordable ways to acquire, shop or cook food for the households experiencing food insecurity. Most prominent of such projects has been the expansion of food banks, charitable food aid projects that distribute free bags of groceries (often referred to as "food parcels") to people experiencing food insecurity (3). The Trussell Trust has the largest network of food banks in the UK, operating about 1300 distribution sites in 2022. But outside of this network, almost as many independent food banks are thought to operate (4).

With the expansion of food banks across the country and a shift from local authority provision of emergency financial support towards charitable food provision of food banks, these responses have come under scrutiny (5-7). Whilst often lauded for their efforts to respond to food insecurity, qualitative studies of experiences of people using food banks have often documented feelings of shame about using them and that the foods provided in food parcels can be ill-matched to their needs (8-10). Research has also questioned the practice of referral requirements practiced by many food banks and the amount of discretion that food banks exercise when deciding who to help and how (11, 12). Further, though many food banks position themselves as a response to an acute financial crisis, where the acute provision of food aid may be seen an appropriate stopgap measure, evidence of chronic problems of food insecurity among people using food banks and in the wider population suggest that an emergency food aid model may not be best suited to meet the needs of people experiencing food insecurity (3, 13). Importantly, data from the Department for Work and Pensions Family Resources Survey show that the majority of households experiencing food insecurity do not report food bank use (14). These data suggest alternatives to this form of provision may be needed.

Partially in response to recognition of the limitations of food banks and in recognition of the problem of chronic food insecurity, many organisations, including food banks themselves, have explored alternative forms of community food support for people experiencing food insecurity (15). This has led to a proliferation of what will be referred to in this protocol as "community food clubs". These can variously be called social supermarkets, community food shops/stores, or food pantries. Whilst models operate in different ways, common characteristics are:

- A membership structure;
- Food available for a low-cost membership fee or for purchase at prices that are significantly lower than in mainstream retailers;
- Set up to look like a shop or retail environment, with members able to exercise choice of what they acquire;
- Operated by not-for-profit or social enterprise organisations;

- Emphasis on social and community-building aspects, such as opportunity to volunteer and opportunity to interact with others in the local community to help improve mental health of the members; and
- Contribution to environmental goals by reducing food waste through the redistribution of surplus food (16)

Many community food shops also aim to build community relationships and offer a range of activities like skills development, training, debt advice, and cooking classes (16). Opportunities for social support and connection are thought to be crucial elements of these models and have been suggested to be an important element for interventions aimed at tackling food insecurity (17).

Reports from organisations operating community food clubs suggest many benefits of membership including improvements in members' household finances, higher consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, and a positive effect on mental health (18-24). Social outcomes, such as having an opportunity to volunteer and feeling part of a community have also been emphasised. Academic studies in the UK have focused on experiences of individuals participating in community food clubs. For example, in 2023, a study conducted in Sussex analysed the role of two Social Supermarkets and specifically explored the effects of their use on participants' healthy eating (25). Two-thirds of participants reported an improved ability to prepare healthier meals, enabling access to new food sources. However, the study highlighted challenges, including the significance of a lack of food choice, the pay-as-you-feel model, and issues related to difficulties in obtaining required food items (25). The results from two studies undertaken in Greater Manchester and West Midland regions, involving 11 semi-structured interviews of the providers within the food aid organizations and 24 in-depth interviews of individuals with lived experiences of food insecurity and accessing emergency or supplementary food support, pointed out that the food banks could unintentionally contribute to poverty-based segregation as their organisational structure restricts access to food to only the individuals who are in dire need and require emergency food support, and therefore, may prevent them to transition to more secure modes of food access (26, 27). In contrast to this 'sticking plasters' approach of food banks, social supermarkets can offer wider support to aid transition from the segregating spaces of food poverty to more secure, dignified, inclusive, and therefore, sustainable forms of food access (26, 27).

We identified one evaluation that incorporated a stronger study design (28). It was an evaluation of a pilot programme of five new social supermarkets conducted by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, which incorporated before-and-after measures, reporting differences in outcomes between entry and exit interviews for members. However, only 431 exits surveys were conducted compared to 1,119 entry interviews and within-individual comparisons were not made. They reported that at entry, 69% of members reported that they often skip a meal or go without food, but that at exit interviews (approximately 6 months of social supermarket membership), this was reduced to 18%. There was also an increase in the proportion of people reporting they regularly eat five portions of fruit and vegetables each day (from 18% to 60%). Indicators of self-efficacy and locus of control were also reported on, with positive trends reported across all indicators, suggesting an increase in resilience. Life satisfaction ranking was also higher at exit interviews (28). However, given the considerable decline in the response rate over the follow up period, these effects may be exaggerated, representing only those who were deriving the most benefit from membership.

It is notable that to enable low-cost membership fees or prices, most, if not all, community food shop models operating in the UK are heavily reliant on sources of surplus food, that is, food that otherwise would go to waste as a result of overstocking, mislabelling, being past “Best before” dates, or other reasons. Many community food clubs receive food from national surplus food redistributors, such as FareShare and His Church; others are surplus food redistributors themselves, having direct relationships with food manufacturers and retailers and being involved in the collection and distribution of surplus food to their frontline community food shops or hubs (e.g. The Bread and Butter Thing and Community Shop via their association with Company Shop). This feature may affect the effectiveness of these models and likely relate to experiences of inconsistent supplies of products, as found in some qualitative studies (25).

Research gaps

From our examination of the grey and academic literature, there is a lack of independent high-quality evidence on the impact of membership in community food shop models using robust evaluation designs. Validated measures of outcomes of interest relating to food insecurity, dietary quality, and mental health and well-being have also not been utilised in this context. Prior studies have also relied on self-reports from members after they have already been members for some time, making findings vulnerable to selection and recall bias. To our knowledge, there have been no studies that have compared outcomes between people who have transitioned into membership compared to those who remain without a membership after making an application for one (3). Using a natural experiment design will allow estimation of effects of membership that are closer to the causal effects.

Local and national policy relevance

Understanding the impacts of community food club membership on individuals is important, as there is notable investment in community food club models among local authorities and devolved governments in the UK. For example, Northern Ireland’s Department for Communities piloted the funding of five social supermarkets over 2017 to 2020, which led to the Communities Minister proposing that Social Supermarket models be supported across Northern Ireland. Over 2022-23, this expansion was allocated £1.5 million (28, 29).

The Local Government Association in England also profiles a number of local authorities investing in food pantry/food hub models as part of their Cost-of-Living Responses (30). Whilst there is not centralised government funding going directly to these models, community food shops are receiving funding through the UK Government’s Household Support Fund funding in places where local authorities are choosing to allocate them this funding.

Examples include:

- **Birmingham Affordable Food Model Grant:** As part of their Cost-of-Living response, Birmingham City Council (BCC) offered up to £20,000 to organisations to set up Affordable Food Models in specified locations in Birmingham over 2024. Up to £160,000 was made available, funded from BCC’s allocation of the UK Government’s Household Support Fund (31).
- **Barnsley GoodFood Pantry:** Offers integral support (e.g. setup support, financial assistance, ongoing help in sourcing food) from Barnsley Council to set up a food pantry. All GoodFood Pantries use the same branding, membership model and policies (30, 32).
- **Coventry Food Network:** Has mapped social supermarkets, food hubs and food banks and has established a network of 15 social supermarkets (30, 33)

- **Isle of Wight community pantries:** Established a network of community pantries across the island and aims to provide additional support to new pantries. Offers a set-day delivery service to residents living in a four-mile radius genuinely unable to attend the pantry (34).
- **Nottinghamshire FOOD (Food on our Doorstep) Clubs:** Programme that provides families with nutritious foods and encourages them to learn about eating and cooking. 21 new clubs have been opened by money provided by Nottinghamshire County Council's Emergency Assistance and Social Recovery Funds on top of the Childhood Obesity Trailblazer Programme funding (30, 35).

Theory of Change

A draft Theory of Change outlining the potential effects of membership in community food club models is outlined using a Causal Loop Diagram in <https://kumu.io/juanitabernal/your-local-pantry-toc#your-local-pantry-causal-loop-diagram>. This model maps potential outcomes, but also embeds them within the system of the food pantry and wider food and social system, underscoring the complexity of the intervention and how reach and effectiveness may depend on many wider factors. It also identifies potential outcomes beyond those observed for members, including for volunteers and the environment, though these are outside the scope of this evaluation.

There are five main mechanisms by which community food shops are expected to lead to positive outcomes for members. These include:

- By providing healthy food at more affordable prices than in supermarkets and other mainstream food retailers, people are able to acquire a greater quantity and quality of food, reducing their food insecurity and improving their dietary quality. These outcomes can also lead to positive impacts on mental health and well-being.
- The overall savings on food expenditure achieved through community food club models should free up funds for essential non-food expenses such as debt repayments, bill payments, clothing, transport, and energy costs. This financial benefit not only alleviates strain on household budgets but also positively influences mental health and overall well-being.
- Many community food shops also offer social spaces and emphasise their social interactions with volunteers, staff, and fellow community members, enabling individuals to derive social benefits that positively influence mental health and overall well-being.
- Community food shops also strive to provide additional social services on-site as well as advice and signposting to other social services, thereby potentially increasing access to wrap-around support. This is another mechanism whereby membership can lead to positive outcomes in other areas (e.g. debt resolution, benefits maximization, resolution of housing issues). In turn, access to this support improves mental health and well-being.
- Where individuals using community food shops have experienced stigma relating to having to use food banks or being referred for this charitable support, belonging to a community food shop as a member and paying into membership may increase personal sense of dignity and in turn, mental health and wellbeing.

Research Questions

The **primary research question** that will be addressed in outcome evaluation is “**Does YLP food pantry membership reduce food insecurity?**”

The **secondary research questions** that will be addressed in the outcome evaluation are:

“Does YLP food pantry membership...

- ...increase mental well-being”?
- ...improve dietary quality”?
- ...reduce financial hardship”?
- ...reduce loneliness”?
- ...increase self-rated general health”?
- ...increase personal sense of dignity”?
- ...reduce non-food material hardships”?

Methods

Study design

Our study has been designed as a natural experiment outcome evaluation, allowing us to uncover the causal effect of YLP membership. The natural experiment design uses YLP waiting lists at pantries to divide eligible participants into groups exposed and unexposed to YLP membership over specific time periods.

In addition to the natural experiment design, we will also estimate the effect of membership from a simple before-after design, as has been used in a previous study (11). The before-after design measures outcomes on participants at baseline, before people have used a food pantry, and compares these to outcomes when membership is obtained. Unlike the prior study, we will make within-individual comparisons, to reduce bias from unobserved characteristics. Estimates from this design are like to overestimate the effects of membership because at the “before” stage, when they just applied for YLP membership, participants are selected to have particularly low values of the outcome variables. Comparing our estimates from the natural experiment with those from the before-after study should help us to situate our results in relation to previous studies.

The number of applicants going onto waitlists is relatively low compared to the total number of people applying for memberships across the YLP network (see the section on “Study procedures - Invitation and recruitment process” below for more detail). There are many more applicants who obtain membership immediately than applicants that first enter on a waitlist, making recruitment for the natural experiment challenging. People also do not spend very long on wait lists generally. Therefore, a second reason for the before-after study design in addition to the natural experiment design is that it allows us to make more efficient use of the sample of YLP membership applicants. If we are not able to recruit a sufficient number of participants into the natural experiment study, the before-after study will still be powered.

Study population

Participants will be adult representatives of households who newly apply for membership of a YLP food pantry in England during the fieldwork period (~ mid-February to July 2025). Participants will include those allocated membership immediately and those who are put on a waiting list at the time of the application.

Inclusion criteria

To be included in this study, individuals will have filled out an application form to join a participating YLP pantry. Only applicants who are older than 18 years of age will be eligible to participate but there will be no upper age limit.

YLP membership application forms are only provided in English, however, applicants who don't speak English may receive help to receive the form from YLP staff or volunteers or friends or family. To include participants who don't speak English but who have applied for a YLP membership, over-the-phone interpretation services will be made available for them to find out about the study and fill out questionnaires.

Exclusion criteria

Recruitment will not take place at YLP sites located outside of England or at sites that opt not to take part in this study. Pantries that have been operating for three months or less at the start of data collection will also not be eligible to participate. In addition, pantries that vary from YLP's standard model (described below) will also not be eligible to participate. Variation from the standard model includes allowing members to shop more than once a week and/or deviating from the standard allocation of 7 heart and 3 diamond items (described below).

Individuals who are not able to provide informed consent will not be eligible to participate in this study. Due to the use of remote data collection in the study, individuals who are unable to complete questionnaires online or over the phone with a researcher will also not be eligible to participate. Lastly, where identifiable in YLP records, people who have previously held a YLP membership will also not be eligible to participate.

Intervention

The intervention is YLP food pantry membership. In exchange for a pay-on-use fee that ranges from £3.50 to £7 depending on the pantry, membership provides access to a weekly "shop" for ten items of a variety of food, including frozen and chilled food, meat, dairy, vegetarian and vegan products, alongside a supply of tins and packets of long shelf-life foods, as well as fresh fruit and vegetables and bakery items from the members' YLP food pantry (24). The value of items acquired after paying the usage fee has been estimated to be £21. In addition, most YLP pantries offer additional services at their sites and access to these is part of YLP membership (described below).

It is not clear *a priori* whether pantry membership affects outcomes immediately or gradually. Therefore, in our analysis we will consider membership as a binary variable (access or no access), where the effects are assumed to be immediate for members because of both the felt and real benefit of being granted access to a pantry, and as a continuous variable, where the number of days of membership is measured, and where benefits are expected to increase over time as members become more familiar with the pantry and increasingly benefit from its services.

Comparator/control

The comparison group for participants with YLP membership are people who have applied for YLP membership but have not (yet) obtained it. As explained under study design above, we will make this comparison in two different ways. In a longitudinal before-after design, we will compare outcomes of participants after they obtain membership with outcomes of the same participants when they applied but had not yet obtained membership. In this case, the control group are the same people as the treatment group, but at a different point in time, shortly before they obtain membership. Second, we will use the variation in waiting lists across pantries as a natural experiment and compare participants who were on a waiting list

but have now obtained membership with other participants who are still on a waiting list. In this case, the treatment and control groups both consist of people who have recently applied for membership and were placed on a waiting list, but the control group are those that happened to apply to pantries with a longer waiting list.

Outcome measures

Primary outcome measure

The primary outcome measure will be probability of food insecurity. We will use the FAO Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), which is a validated measure of household and individual level experience of food insecurity (36). This recall period of this scale will be adapted to capture experiences in the past 2 weeks. Food insecurity will be considered as “any food insecurity” corresponding to any affirmative responses to items on the FIES; moderate and severe food insecurity, corresponding to 3 or more affirmatives on the FIES; and severe food insecurity, corresponding to 7 or more affirmative responses on the FIES.

Secondary outcome measures

In addition to primary outcome, there are number of secondary outcomes that are of interest, relating to our theory of change outlining the potential impacts of YLP membership. These include:

- Mental health and well-being score, as measured by the Short (7 item) Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Health and Wellbeing Scale (37).
- Diet quality score as assessed by a short 14-item FFQ validated in the UK adolescent and adult population (38, 39)
- Proportion reporting ability to keep up with bills, debts, and credit commitments (Adapted from: UK Wealth and Assets Survey).
- Proportion reporting loneliness as measured by the UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale (40)
- Proportion reporting good or very good health as measured by a self-rated general health question used in UK-based surveys (e.g. Family Resources Survey).
- Treated with dignity (single item from a 3-item dignity measure (41))
- Proportion reporting going without one or more other non-food essential items based on Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Destitution Measure (42).

Outcomes relating to diet-related chronic disease, health and environmental sustainability may be explored in a separate modelling study, as part of another work package within the SALIENT consortium.

Please also see Data Collection and Analysis sections for information about additional variables that will be collected and explored in the analysis.

Timeframe

Recruitment for this study is projected to begin in late-February 2025 and will run approximately for 6 months. It is anticipated that in this time frame, sufficient numbers of people who spend time on the waitlist will be recruited (See Recruitment in Study Procedures section below).

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study will be obtained from the Central Ethics Committee at the University of Liverpool.

Study Setting

The Your Local Pantry Model

Study participants will be recruited from people applying to join a community food club that is part of the YLP network and our research questions centre around whether being a member of a food pantry in this network impacts on health and well-being outcomes. Below, we provide more information on the YLP model.

YLP, in partnership with Church Action on Poverty, is a “social franchise” of community food clubs. Community groups and charities interested in starting a community food club model can express their interest in becoming a YLP branded food pantry, then pay a membership fee to join the network and receive support from the central YLP team. As of June 2024, there were 121 pantries located across the UK, with the greatest concentration in the North-West and the West Midlands regions of England (24). The number of pantries has been steadily increasing since the franchise model was adopted in 2018.

All food pantries that are part of the YLP network share common features (24). These include:

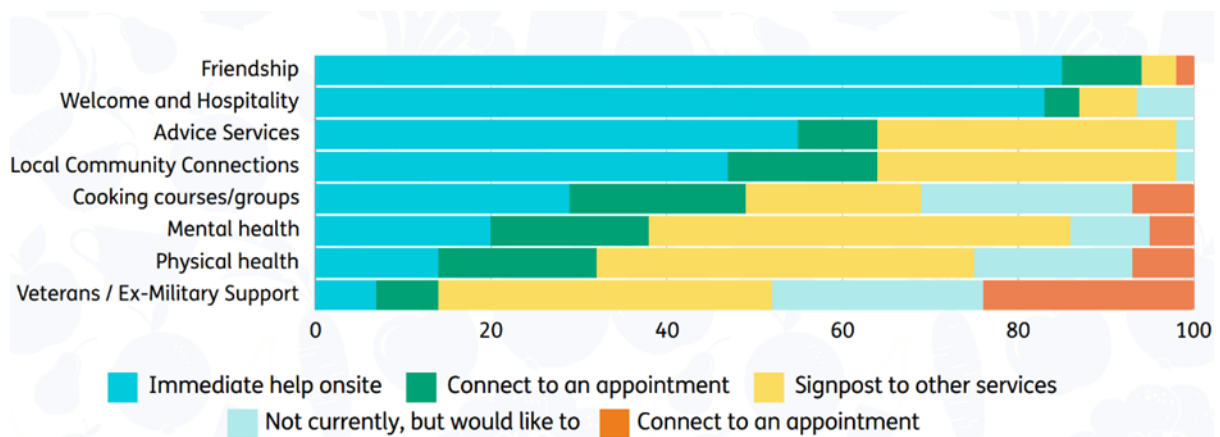
- Not requiring a referral from a third-party agency to become a member of the YLP. Interested individuals fill out an application form, and as part of this form, they are asked three different questions relating to struggling with finances/ability to afford food. A self-reported indication of financial need is sufficient for a membership. Some pantries also require residency in a local catchment area, usually within 3 miles of a pantry. There are no data collected on what leads people to find out and apply for the membership to a YLP setting in their local area; it is likely that they are promoted in different ways in local areas, depending on the organisation running the pantry and their local networks. However, to become a member, everyone must fill out a membership application form.
- There is no up-front membership cost for joining a YLP - i.e. there is no direct debit membership or monthly subscription requirement. Instead, a “membership usage fee” is paid on use of the pantry, which is limited to one shopping occasion per week. Usage fees range from £3.50-£7 per shopping occasion across different pantries. Members can use the pantry up to once a week, but are not required to use this often.
- Pantries offer a choice of foods, with a focus on “good quality food, including fresh fruit and vegetables, frozen and chilled food, meat, dairy, vegetarian and vegan products, alongside a supply of tins and packets.”
- A weekly pantry shop is intended to supplement, rather than completely replace, a household’s regular food shopping. Items in shops contain either diamond or heart codes. Each shop, members are allowed to select seven lower value “diamond” items (under £1.50 RRP – usually including, dry or stored foods such as pasta, cereals, canned vegetables, canned fish, oil, coffee, etc., and other essential items such as baby diapers, toilet papers, shampoos, washing power, dishwashing liquid, etc.) and 3 higher value “heart” items (over £1.50, usually including, fresh vegetables, fruits, berries, eggs, milk, meat, etc.) and free items (usually fruit and veg or baked goods). Everything is labelled to make the selection easy, and members choose themselves. Staff and volunteers are present at sites to offer help with the selection where members request to do so.

- Each YLP member pantry is independent. They are solely responsible for managing their day-to-day operations. The centralised YLP team is made up of only a few staff members. One role on this team is for dedicated development workers to help groups to start new pantries, and more broadly, the central team focuses on facilitating shared learning and providing training and support.
- Each pantry is also part of YLP's bespoke cash-in/cash-out membership software system tracking number of times a member uses a pantry as well as other details about when they joined, whether or not they were put on a waiting list, and when they first visited their food pantry.

Across the 121 YLP pantries operating in the UK, as of June 2024, there were about 13,000 households with active YLP memberships (18, 24). Membership data is based on active use of the pantry in the past 30 days, though people are able to return to use the pantry within a 90-day period of non-use. Most people just stop using the pantry rather than actively removing themselves from membership.

It is also important to note that in addition to offering food for a low-cost membership usage fee, YLP sites offer different types of support, such as social spaces, on-site advice and signposting. Figure 1 shows the percentage of sites offering support services by their type across the YLP network as in the 2024 YLP Impact Report (24). The percentage of sites offering immediate on-site welfare and debt advice services and hospitality services has increased to more than 50% and 85% of the sites, respectively, in this year (24). The percentage of sites offering on-site immediate services for mental and physical health has also been increased from 8% to 20% and from 2% to 14% sites between 2023 and 2024 (24).

Figure 1: Different support services offered across Your Local Pantry sites (Social Impact Report 2024; n=52 sites) (24)



Note:

Y-axis= type of service

X-Axis= percentage of YLP sites offering the service and by whether service onsite, signposted, or referred. Orange is mislabelled in graph; should be "Not applicable in our context." Connect to an appointment refers to individualised referral or connection to another service.

Study procedures

Invitation and recruitment process

This study will involve recruiting participants amongst people applying for memberships to food pantries across the YLP network in England. Whilst ideally all food pantries in the YLP network will take part, all YLP pantries will be contacted prior the fieldwork period to inform them about the study and allowing them to opt out of their pantry participating if so desired. Some pantries may also not be invited to take part due to imminent departure from the YLP network or because the way they operate their food pantry departs too much from the standardised YLP model.

Individuals interested in joining the YLP food pantry across the YLP network need to complete a membership application form (<https://churchpoverty.my.site.com/s/member-sign-up>). Applicants can choose which pantry they want to join based on the location and opening times of the pantries. The application form is available online but many food pantries also make the form available onsite, where people can fill the form on tablets and with the help of staff or volunteers. When someone completes an application form, they immediately receive a confirmation message saying that their application has been received, and if they've provided an email address, this information is also passed to them this way.

Following submission of a membership application to a pantry, the YLP pantry coordinator at the pantry selected receives a notification of the application. They are asked to review the application and then decide whether or not to approve it. When pantries have capacity for new members and the applicant lives within the catchment area for the pantry, in almost all cases, the application will be approved. Pantries are asked to review applications within 5-7 days of submission, but data from the YLP database suggests that in 70% of cases, applications are approved on the same day they are submitted. Approval of a membership application triggers an automatic email being sent to the applicant notifying them that their membership has been approved; where applicants haven't submitted an email address, a phone call will be made instead by the pantry coordinator.

When pantries do not have capacity for new members (i.e. already at their maximum capacity, which is related to quantity of food stock they have to distribute, operating hours, and staff and volunteer capacity), applicants will instead receive an email or phone call telling them they have been placed on a waiting list due to a lack of space. Importantly, to our knowledge and based on conversations with the YLP central team, memberships are granted on a "first-come, first-served basis", and no other criteria are used to allocate these. Therefore, time spent on a waiting list should be random, and there should be no systematic differences between people who apply and are granted a membership quickly and those who apply and have to go on a waiting list for a substantial amount of time.

During the fieldwork period, people applying for membership at participating pantries will find out about the opportunity to join the SALIENT research study in the confirmation messages they receive on completing an application (email and landing page message). A brief description of the study will be provided in the form of a Study Invitation video. This information will make clear that their full participation will result in them being sent up to £45 in non-food shopping vouchers. All interested potential participants will then be directed to express their interest in participating in the study by filling out an online Expression of Interest form (Microsoft Forms). Additionally, contact details of the research team will be provided in case potential participants are unable to use this form.

To reach people who are filling application forms in person and/or who may not have an email address, flyers containing the QR codes to link people to the Study Invitation Video

and Expression of Interest form will also be made available on site at the participating pantries. These will be distributed by pantry staff and volunteers who assist with membership applications.

To further promote the study amongst people who are placed on the waiting list, information will again be provided in the email they receive when they are told they've been placed on a waiting list. Food pantry coordinators making phone calls to tell people they have been placed on a waiting list will also share information about the study again at that time.

The Expression of Interest form will collect contact details (name, phone, SMS/WhatsApp preference, address), information about the YLP pantry applied to, and their YLP application number, if known. They will also indicate whether they know if their YLP food pantry membership application has been approved, whether they're on the waitlist or whether they don't yet know the outcome. This information will also be validated using the YLP's membership data for the accuracy, and people completing this form will be told that their information will be shared with YLP to confirm that they have made a membership application and are eligible to take part in the study.

Everyone who fills out the EOI will also be told that not everyone who registers their interest is able to take part in the study. This is because we need to maximise participation among people who are on waiting lists and limit the number of people who become members right away to enable sufficient sample size for a natural experiment design (i.e., comparison of outcomes between those who transition from no membership to membership compared to those who remain without membership) (see below).

We have used data collected by YLP over March to May 2024 to estimate the number of people who could potentially be recruited each week. In this period, there were, on average, 162 applications for a YLP membership made each week (see Table 1 below). About 77% of applications appeared to have been approved for membership on the day they applied and 23% to have had some days before being granted membership. This means that each week, we expect about 125 applicants to go immediately into membership and 37 applicants not to go into immediate membership.

Table 1: Length of time spent on a waiting list for YLP membership among people applying for memberships in March-May 2024 (n=2109).

	N	% of all membership applications	% of those not granted immediate membership
0 days	1,627	77.2	---
<14 days	315	14.9	65.4
<28 days	66	3.13	13.7
<42 days	17	0.81	3.5
<56 days	8	0.38	1.7
<70 days	5	0.24	1.0
70+ days	71	3.37	14.7
Total in 13 weeks	2109		
Total per week	162		

For the natural experiment design, applicants at pantries without a waitlist will not be included in the analytical sample because they won't contribute at all to the estimates. However, people who are granted memberships right away are still useful for the before-after study, and because they make up the majority of applicants, they will be easier to recruit. It is also important for us to understand how if the sample of participants on waitlists differs from people who are granted memberships right away. In this group, however, we will prioritise people who have not yet made a visit to a food pantry at the time of recruitment into the study.

Thus, our target groups for recruitment are 1) people who, at the time of filling out their Expression of Interest form indicate that they have not yet heard the outcome of their membership or have been put on the waiting list; and 2) for the before-after analysis and to enable comparisons of our waiting list sample with people who have been approved for membership right away, we will also recruit a random sub-sample of this group who have not yet attended a food pantry, with a target to recruit about 10% of people who receive memberships right away.

Given our priority to recruit people who do not go into membership right away, on receiving Expressions of Interest from the potential participants, the research team will check status of their membership with YLP to identify if they have received immediate membership, do not yet know the outcome of their membership application or if they have been placed on a waiting list. All potential participants put on the waiting list or who indicate not yet knowing the outcome of their membership will be sent recruitment materials. A random sample of about 10% of people applying for memberships per week who already have a membership will also be sent recruitment materials. People who have not yet visited a pantry will be prioritised. A random number generator will be used to select participants into this sample each week if the number of people in this group exceeds 10% of people granted memberships right away.

Recruitment materials will include a Participant Information Sheet and Participant Information Video. These materials will be sent by text message/WhatsApp message and/or email; the message will also direct them to a study website where they can find the materials. Where necessary, the research team will follow up with the potential participants by a phone call or another text/email message.

The research team and YLP will monitor the rate of submissions of EOI forms by pantry, and where there is a relatively low number of submissions to number of applications, the YLP central team will reach out to the food pantry to check if there are any barriers to people finding out about the study.

Consent

A consent form will be embedded as the first stage of the baseline questionnaire. Individuals interested in taking part in the study will have to confirm their consent before they are able to move ahead with the baseline study questionnaire. Where questionnaires are being completed over the phone, a researcher will read out the consent questions and participants will have to affirm their agreement to each statement verbally.

Primary data collection

Survey data collection will be managed by a third-party market research company known for their expertise in social and public health research. Participants will be sent a personalised link to the baseline questionnaire to enable tracking over survey waves.

Participants will be asked to complete a baseline questionnaire and three additional questionnaires at 2 weeks, 6 weeks, and 10 weeks following their application for YLP membership. The baseline questionnaire will comprise questions about the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants and household members. In addition, at baseline, 2 weeks, 6 weeks and 10 weeks, questions on food insecurity, mental wellbeing, dietary intake, financial hardship, loneliness, self-rated general health, and non-food material hardships will be asked.

Where the participants need support in completing the questionnaire, the researchers will contact the participants over the phone or via Teams to read out the questionnaire and record their responses. Interpretation services will be made available through the survey provider should participants wish to complete the questionnaire in a language other than English.

Throughout the data collection, the survey company will actively contact the participants using their preferred communication method (e.g., text messages/ WhatsApp/ Email), sharing survey links at each data collection timepoint and sending reminder messages. The research team will additionally reach out with more personalised messages. This will be done to minimise the loss-to-follow-up over the study period.

Secondary data collection

With participants' permission, YLP will share the records containing the following details about the participants:

- When the membership application is submitted and approved
- The duration for which the applicants are put on the waiting list to join YLP membership
- When pantry visits are made
- When memberships lapse

Participants will be asked for their permission for their above-mentioned data to be shared within the consent form. These data will be linked via participants names, contact details, YLP membership ID. Data will be shared via secure file transfer in the form of password-protected Excel documents.

In addition to the data described above, the full database of people applying for YLP membership over the study period will be analysed. These data will be anonymised before being shared with the research team. This will enable a comparison of the duration of waiting periods and accessing memberships and any socioeconomic characteristics of those who participated in the study with those who did not participate, enabling a better understanding of who study findings will be generalisable to. A dummy variable indicating whether or not the YLP membership applicants took part will be included, enabling comparisons between participants and non-participants.

Variables that will be included in this data set are included in Appendix 1, Box A1.

Participant compensation

Participation in the study will be compensated with the provision of shopping vouchers for each questionnaire the participants complete. The shopping vouchers will enable them to access shops that do not provide food (e.g. Argos). Participants will receive a shopping voucher worth £10 for each questionnaire they complete, and an additional shopping voucher worth £5 for completing all four questionnaires. Consequently, they will have a chance to receive £45 in shopping vouchers in total.

These incentives are designed to encourage participation for the full course of the study (10 weeks) and also to offer participants immediate compensation and recognition of the time they are putting into completing our study.

Importantly, all shopping vouchers will be sent electronically by email with 7 days of participants completing a questionnaire. But if they can't receive shopping vouchers electronically (by email/ text message), they will be sent one shopping voucher in the post, but only at the end of the study, for the total amount earned over the study (i.e. up to £45 on the card). This is explained in the Participant Information Sheet. This is necessary due to the high expense of sending shopping vouchers in the post, so unfortunately it is not possible for us to send them this way for every questionnaire.

Quantitative analysis plan

Anticipated sample size and power calculations

As above, we obtained data from YLP's central database over March to May 2024 to gain an understanding of expected number of applications for YLP membership across the network in England. There were $n=2483$ membership applications across 101 food pantries in England in these three months. Excluding applications missing information about the timing of membership and time spent on waitlists, we analysed the distribution of applications that went immediately into membership and the time spent on a waiting list before membership. These data are summarised in table 1 above.

For a potential effect size of membership on food insecurity, we looked at data from a YLP members' survey from 2023. Participants were asked if being a member had improved the quantity of food they acquired, with about 50% indicating this was the case. They were also asked if it had increased the quantity of fruit and vegetables they eat, with 63% indicating this was the case. Whilst neither of these are validated measures of food insecurity, validated measures such as the Food Insecurity Experience Scale ask respondents to indicate if they've been unable to eat nutritious foods and also if they've had experiences of going without food. We would anticipate that these experiences will become less common with food pantry membership, and therefore expect a reduction of food insecurity of 15 percentage points, where participants move from having experiences of going without food, not being to eat enough, skipping meals and not being able to access nutritious foods to no longer experiencing these; marginal experiences of food insecurity (i.e. worry about not having enough food to eat) may not be eliminated, however.

We used a simulation approach to calculate the sample size that would be required for detecting an effect size of membership on food insecurity of -15 percentage points from baseline at 5% significance with 80% power. The simulations suggest that about 62 participants would be needed for the natural experiment, for which we would need to screen about 300 applicants. If we also include 10% of screened participants with a wait-time of zero in the study, then the before-after study should be comfortably powered as well.

If we expect about 50% of people applying for memberships to express an interest in the study (and then to be screened for participation), we need a minimum of 600 people to apply for memberships over the fieldwork period. Based on the applicant numbers in spring 2024, a fieldwork period of 5-6 months should be of sufficient duration for recruitment to meet these targets.

We will aim to maximise invitations to participate in the study over the fieldwork period up to a total of n=300 people initially being recruited into the study. This is to allow for the possibility of high study attrition.

Data Analysis Plan

We will examine how YLP membership relates to the change in food insecurity:

Food insecurity_{ipwt} = β * YLP membership_{ipwt} + control variables and fixed effects + error term

Where subscript i indicates an individual participant, p is a pantry, w the number of weeks since an application for membership was made, and t is the calendar week.

We will explore different specifications depending on the measure of food insecurity, including linear probability and probit models for food insecurity (3+ affirmatives on the FIES scale) and severe food insecurity (7+ affirmatives on the FIES scale), an OLS regression treating the 8-point FIES score as a continuous variable, and an ordered probit of the number of affirmatives on the FIES scale YLP membership.

We will explore two ways to measure YLP membership: an indicator for being a member at data collection time point, and the number of days of membership up to the date of the interview. Which of these measures is more appropriate depends on the speed at which any benefits from membership are realised. If food insecurity reduces almost immediately upon receiving YLP membership, then the relevant treatment variable is current membership; if benefits accrue gradually over time, then (a possibly non-linear function of) days of membership is more appropriate.

All specifications will include pantry and time fixed effects (appropriately dealing with incidental parameter problems in the non-linear specifications). We will also include either person fixed effects, which corresponds to the before-after study design, or week-in-trial fixed effects, which corresponds to the natural experiment design. In specifications without person fixed effects, we will include personal characteristics as control variables. Standard errors will be clustered at the person level to allow for serial correlation, and if sample size allows, we will also consider clustering at the pantry level to allow for correlation across individuals within pantries, i.e., members of the same pantry being more similar to each other than members of different pantries.

Our secondary analyses will follow the same specifications outlined above, but the preferred specification may differ across outcomes, depending on whether these are best measured as continuous variables, scores, or indicators, and on the dynamics of the effect of membership on the outcome.

For our primary and secondary outcomes, we will also aim to explore whether outcomes differ by baseline socio-demographic and hardship data collected in the questionnaire. We will report the power we have for to detect these interaction effects. Variables of interest include:

- Gender, age, ethnicity, or immigration status of the study participant;
- Presence of children in the household;
- Disability status of the participant or household members;
- Baseline report of difficulties in accessing food for non-financial reasons (e.g. disability, distance to shops);
- Baseline report of financial hardship; and
- Baseline report of food bank use in the past 12 months.

Lastly, we will also consider how frequency of food pantry usage interacts with membership. It is possible that more frequent use maximises the benefits of food pantry membership, but frequent use may also indicate more difficult circumstances.

Process evaluation

The process evaluation plan has been developed jointly with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and will form a separate ethics submission. This evaluation aims to explore the experiences of YLP members, assess implementation quality, and identify barriers and facilitators to YLP membership. The specific research questions that will be addressed by the **process evaluation** are:

- What do members receive with membership in YLP food pantries and how does this differ across different sites?
- What do food pantry members, food pantry staff and volunteers perceive are the impacts of YLP food pantry membership on food security, mental health and well-being, and other outcomes?
- What do members and food pantry staff and volunteers perceive to be barriers and facilitators to the impact(s) of YLP membership?

Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with three groups after the main study period.

YLP members: A subset of participants who participate in the main trial will be recruited for the qualitative interviews. At the time of completing the main study consent form, they will be asked if they are willing to be approached about participating in optional interviews, as part of a separate aspect of the study. Amongst those who indicate a willingness to participate in interviews, a purposive sample will be selected. Selection will prioritise participants from the same 6-8 pantries. Selection of the 6-8 pantries will be based on geographical region and having enough participants in the main study from whom to recruit for qualitative interviews. Other pantry characteristics that will be considered for selection may relate to differences in services offered, differences in membership fees, and differences in food supplies (e.g. extent to which they rely on surplus versus purchased food). Where possible, the sample will also be selected to ensure a diversity of ages, genders, and ethnicities.

When contacted about participating in interviews, participants will be offered the choice of completing the interview by telephone, or on a video call (via MS teams, or WhatsApp).

YLP managers, customer-facing staff, and volunteers: Managers, staff and volunteers from the same 6-8 pantries where member participants are recruited from will be contacted about participating in interviews or focus groups for the process evaluation. Questions will explore their roles in the development and implementation of the YLP pantries, the barriers and facilitators to YLP membership effectiveness, and their perceptions of impact.

In addition to stakeholders recruited from *a priori* identified pantries, centralised stakeholders in the YLP network will be recruited. **Key decision makers**, including the Pantry model coordinator, Research and Evaluation manager and Chief Executive will be approached to participate. They will be asked about their roles in the development and implementation of the YLP pantries, the implementation process, associated costs, and any unintended consequences. They will also be asked about barriers and facilitators to effectiveness and their perceptions of YLP membership impact.

Across these three groups, it is expected that 20-30 people will be interviewed in total. All interviews will be audio-recorded, subject to participant consent. All participants will receive shopping vouchers for their participation.

PPI contributions and feedback

General feedback on the proposed intervention was sought from the five members of the SALIENT specific public involvement group. Some of the contributors we gathered feedback from have experience as volunteers in food aid settings or have signposted service users to such organisations at work. One contributor has experience as a community organiser and of using a food pantry.

Public contributors reviewed and gave feedback on study and recruitment materials (including an invitation message after someone has made an application to the food pantry, video invitation script, expression of interest form, information sheet, consent form, and the baseline questionnaire). In particular, the contributors commented on the suitability of the shopping vouchers for completing each questionnaire. They also commented on the level of detail and complexity of the questionnaire, and made a few suggestions for streamlining questions.

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Appendix 1

Box A1 Variables that will be compared between participants and non-participants using data from the YLP database.

- Sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age band, ethnicity, etc where provided on Equality and Diversity monitoring form)
- Any struggles to pay rent, electricity bill, other essentials
- Current living situation (private rented house, social rented house, owner occupier, mortgage home-owner, living with relatives, living in temporary accommodation, homeless)
- Ever had to cut back on the amount spent on shopping in the last 3 months
- Ever run out of money toward the end of the week
- Number of adults in the household
- Number of children in the household