

What is an unmanned food pantry?

An unmanned food pantry is one where food items are left in a designated place, which can be easily and freely accessed by the public. Sometimes they are also called larders. The pantry is not supervised/manned in that there is not a person present to hand out food.

Pantries can take many forms, such as plastic crates in a porch, a cupboard or shelf in a public building or an outdoor cupboard or storage unit outside a community building.

There are also community fridges. These operate on the same basis but are actual fridges. These are good for supplying fresh items but involve more maintenance, especially in food hygiene.

Some pantries operate on a give and take basis, where people can take things they need but can also donate any items that they no longer need.



Pros and Cons

You should consider the pros and cons of this model carefully to ensure it is right for your community.

Pros	Cons
<p>Pantries can be easy to access for anyone.</p> <p>People will often use a pantry because they are unmanned and so no questions are asked about their circumstances.</p> <p>They are helpful in rural communities where it can be more difficult to access shops or other food projects.</p> <p>There is less volunteer time required in looking after an unmanned pantry.</p>	<p>You are offering something for free without any conditions. Therefore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• You have no control over who is accessing the pantry and how much any person takes at a time. This means those most in need may miss out.<li>• You do not know who is accessing the pantry or why they are using it. This makes it difficult to offer additional support to help reduce a person's reliance on food projects.

Things to consider

Location

A pantry should be located somewhere that is easy for people to access and is accessible a lot of the time, if not 24 hours. Think about where it is located in your town/village. e.g. village hall, church porch, old telephone box.

Is it easy to find but also in a discreet place?

Is it in a safe, well-lit place?

Is it easy for people to get to without a car?

Ensure it is easy for people to locate and identify the pantry. Consider having a poster or the word 'pantry' on the outside, or if it is inside a building have a sign outside so people know there is a free pantry inside the building and where it is located.



Local organisations could work together to organise the pantry e.g. church volunteers oversee the stock, but the pantry is physically located at the village hall, because the church is not centrally located or easy to get to.

Design

Some ideas for a pantry:

- Plastic crates on a table or in a building porch
- Shelf or cupboard in a local building
- Purpose built shed or 'Keter' style storage unit with cupboards and shelves inside

It is helpful to have the name or the word 'pantry' on the outside of the storage to help people identify it.

Preventing Vermin

Food can attract vermin such as mice and rats. An easy way to prevent them is to keep all food in lidded plastic crates. Using clear crates means it is easy for people to see what is inside without the need to remove lids unnecessarily.



Pantry Management

Think about who will be responsible for overseeing the pantry. Will it be one person or a small team of volunteers?

Are you going to accept fresh items e.g. vegetables or only ambient (long life/tinned) products?

If you are happy for people to donate items to the pantry it is helpful to have some guidelines about the type of things that are acceptable.

Volunteers should regularly check dates on items and freshness of any produce in the pantry. You may wish to look at the WRAP website for information about redistributing items past their best before dates.

Promoting your project

How will you let people know about the pantry?

Do you want to keep it small and local, or do you want to let others further afield know about it too?

You could promote the pantry in local village magazines or newsletters and on any village social media pages like Facebook. The Parish council may also have a website that they could advertise the pantry on for you.



If you are happy to promote the pantry further afield you could register it on Suffolk Infolink, to be included on the food project page. <https://infolink.suffolk.gov.uk/kb5/suffolk/infolink/register.page>

Food Supply

How is the pantry going to be stocked?

Is this a funded project whereby volunteers will be purchasing food stocks, or will it operate on a give and take basis, whereby people can donate items as well as taking things they need?

What type of food will be supplied? Ambient food is things like tins, packets, and long-life items. Fresh items could include fruit and vegetables, or items that do not need refrigeration but have a shorter shelf life, e.g. bread.



Will you only supply food, or will you also include personal hygiene items and household cleaning items?

If you have a large supply of food, consider how much you will put out at any time. Because the pantry is unmanned you will not have control over how much a person takes at any time. By limiting how much you put out at any time you can ensure your supply lasts longer.

We recommend keeping large quantities of food elsewhere or locked away, to avoid the risk of theft.

If you are happy for people to donate items into the pantry, it is advisable to have a notice about the types of things that are acceptable and a reminder about best before dates. When promoting your pantry on places such as Facebook, encourage the donation of food items and highlight specific items which get taken quickly, as this helps to encourage community support.

Some pantries have opted for a food waste prevention model, rather than having a focus on food poverty. This can help to encourage pantry use and also removes some of the stigma around accessing free food.

Consider approaching your local greengrocer/ grocery store/ bakery about working together. They could donate their close-to-expiry items to your pantry, thereby reducing food waste in your local area. They could even set up a donation scheme in which customers can round up their bill/ make small donations to supply food to the pantry.

Offering support

People who use the pantry may well be experiencing other problems that they require support with, such as utility bills, housing, out of work, budgeting and money management. As your pantry is unmanned, you will not know who these people are and will not be able to offer additional support and information to them easily.



We strongly recommend having an information board available near the pantry that provides information on how to find and access other support with things such as cost of living, budgeting and finances, housing, benefits.

See the resources section for some leaflets and posters that you can download and print.

Money

Unmanned pantries generally offer food for free so you may not have any involvement with money.

However, you may find people want to give a donation to support your project, or you may at some point want to apply for grants to support your work.

If this is the case, you will need to consider what bank account you use for holding funds. You cannot use a personal bank account for project funds.

It may be possible to work with other local organisations to hold funds for you, such as your parish council. A written agreement may be needed in this situation.



Feedback

As an unmanned pantry, it can be hard to gauge how much your project is needed in the community, as well as which food and non-food items are needed most by the pantry customers. It can be helpful to leave a feedback form and a box for completed forms at the pantry to receive some more information from the people using the pantry without being too intrusive.

See resources for a simple downloadable form.

Resources

IFAN (Independent Food Aid Network)

'Worried about money?' leaflet – an information leaflet about support available in your district:

<https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/cash-first-leaflets>

Community Action Suffolk

'Accessing food in Suffolk' poster – provides a link to the Suffolk Infolink food page, which has a map of various food projects in Suffolk, provides information about Cost of Living Support as well as other food related information. <https://www.communityactionsuffolk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Unmanned-Pantry-Feedback-Form.pdf>

Healthy Start Leaflet

Healthy Start is a government scheme where those who are pregnant or have children under the age of 4, and are on extremely low incomes, may be able to access vouchers for milk and fresh food.

<https://www.healthysuffolk.org.uk/healthy-you/children-and-young-people-1/healthy-start>

Feedback form

A simple feedback form that you can download and print, to gather anonymous feedback about your project.

<https://www.communityactionsuffolk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Unmanned-Pantry-Feedback-Form.pdf>

WRAP (Waste Resources Action Programme)

Download Guidance on Best Before and Use By Dates <https://www.givingworld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Food-date-labelling-poster.pdf>

Guidance for food redistribution <https://wrap.org.uk/resources/guide/surplus-food-redistribution-labelling-guidance>

FSA (Food Standards Agency)

Food Safety guidance for Foodbanks - <https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/food-safety-for-community-cooking-and-food-banks>

For further information or support with setting up a food pantry please contact Community Action Suffolk at info@communityactionsuffolk.org.uk or call 01473 345400.