Impact Beyond Food

How Community Pantries function as places of social connection

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Anglicare

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Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to acknowledge the first and traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, Garramilla, on the Country of the Larrakia people. I would also like to pay respect to the elders, both past and present, and express our gratitude that we share this land today, our sorrow for the cost of that sharing, and our hope that we can move towards a place of justice and partnership together.



“Our Journey, Spirit Growth”

Artist: Rhonda Sampson proud Kamilaroi woman

How the program works

- Partnership between Anglicare Sydney and local Anglican churches
- Mobile and site-based pantries
- Volunteers create welcoming, relational spaces
- Low-cost groceries + hospitality + soft pathways to support



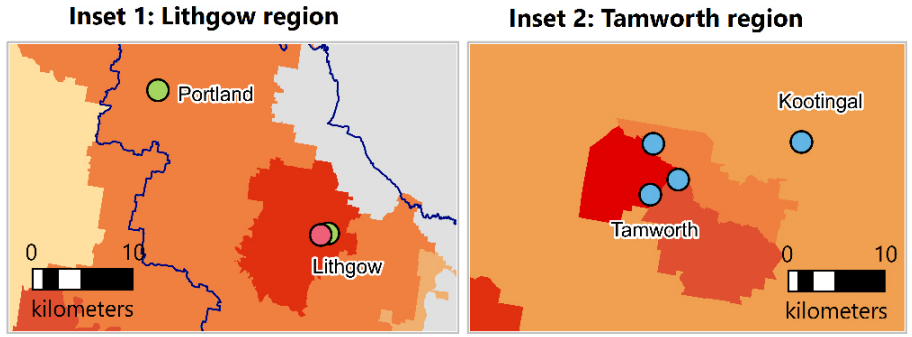
Who the Pantry Serves

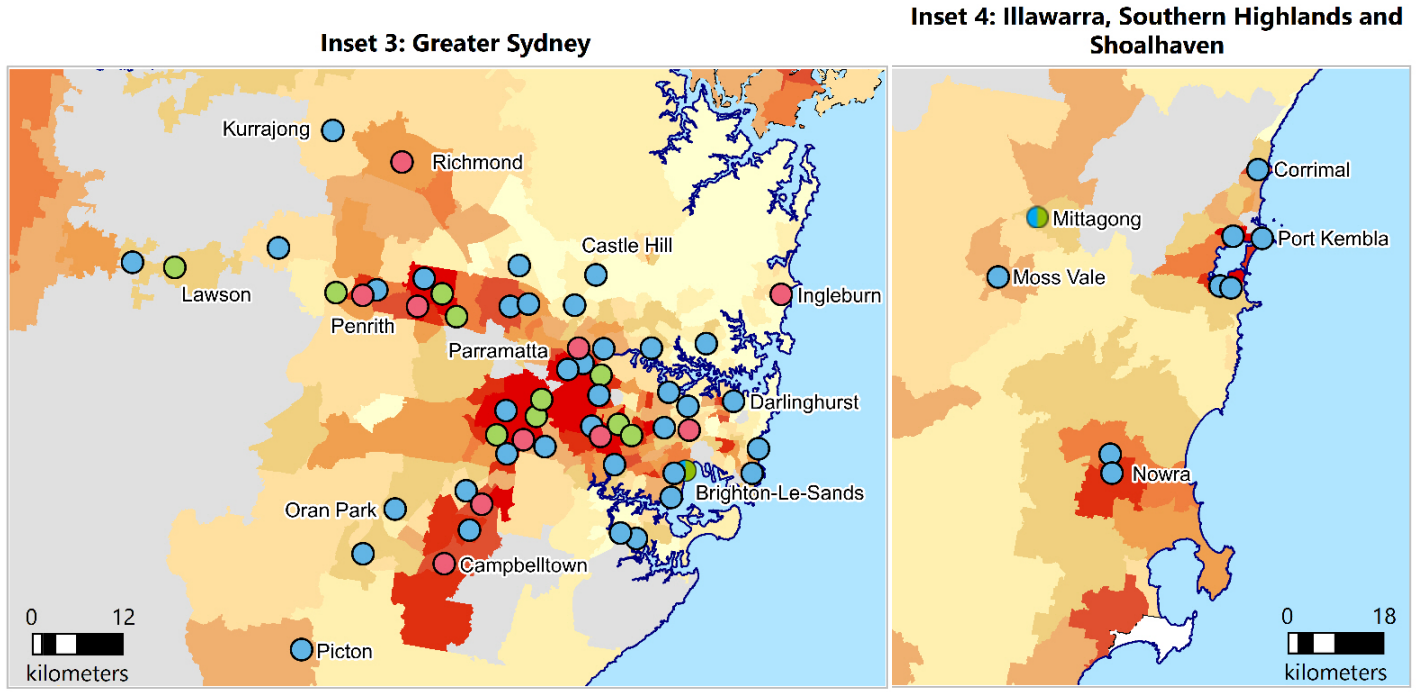
Program reaches

- 75 locations across New South Wales, although the report focuses on 64 mobile church sites
- 80% major cities, 20% regional
- 53% in higher-disadvantage areas

Customer profile (survey):

- 58% aged 65+,
- 76% female,
- 34% living alone





Anglicare Community Pantry 2025

64
pantries at churches across NSW



Over
28,800
food bags sold



Over
2,080
first time customers



Over
13,500kg
of food rescued



Over
10,900
volunteer shifts



Average
savings of **$59**
per pantry staples bag
and **$53**
per fresh food bag



How we usually measure food relief

Community food programs are typically judged through an output-focused lens.

WHAT WE COUNT

Kilograms of food distributed

Dollars saved per bag

Bags sold & visits logged

WHAT THIS MISSES

Dignity & respect

Belonging & connection

Trust - how change actually happens

Outputs matter — but they don't explain why people keep coming back.

What if the pantry is also a third space?

Third spaces are not just locations — they are social infrastructure shaping connection, trust and wellbeing.



Informal, inclusive places

Beyond home and work

Low-cost and accessible

Open to regulars and newcomers



Build social connection

Belonging and trust

Bridging social capital

Reduced social isolation



More than food provision

People come for food, stay for connection

Choice preserves dignity

Pantries act as social hubs

When designed well, food assistance can also function as social infrastructure.

A mixed-methods evaluation

Designed to capture not only the scale of outcomes, but the lived experience behind them.



SURVEYS

652

customer & volunteer survey responses

(response rate of 28% for customer, 47% for volunteers)



INTERVIEWS

19

In-depth conversations capturing the stories behind the numbers



OBSERVATION

10

pantry locations observed on-site

Collected in parallel and triangulated at interpretation, with findings retained only where all three sources converged. Conducted under voluntary informed participation, de-identified observation, and no effect on service access.

At observed sites, numbered tickets removed the need to queue, customers sat together over tea and coffee, and conversations emerged before food distribution began.

Customer response rate: 28% (369 of 1308 estimated unique customers; MoE =+/- 4%)
Volunteer response rate: 47% (283 of 596 volunteers; MoE +/- 4%)

Affordable food is the entry point

96%

of customers reduced their concern about having enough food

97%

of customers found it easier to manage their budget

> *“I don’t have to think about the necessities — it’s all there in the Pantry.”*
>
> **Belinda, customer**

Food gets people through the door. What keeps them coming back is everything that happens next.



Beyond food: connection, belonging and dignity



98%

of customers felt more connected to their community



94%

of customers felt they were treated with dignity & respect



91%

of customers had made at least one new friend at the pantry

> *“The Pantry gives me a reason to leave the house — not just for the products, but for the company.”*
>
> **Kylie, customer**

Reduced isolation. Dignity without stigma.

Building awareness and connection to support

For many customers, the Pantry is a first, trusted point of contact with services. Awareness grows through everyday conversation — not formal referral.

65%

of customers were more aware of Anglicare financial services

46%

of customers had taken part in a church-run activity

The Pantry appears to increase awareness of support options and opportunities for community participation.



A third space serves volunteers too



86%

of volunteers felt more connected to their community



88%

of volunteers have made new friendships at the Pantry



71%

of volunteers gained a stronger sense of purpose

> *“Three years and seventy-two pantries later, everyone has become the family we choose.”*
>
> **Volunteer survey**

Viewing the Pantry through a customer-only lens misses impacts occurring across the wider community network.

What this evaluation can and can’t tell us

Self-selected sample

Customer and Volunteer surveys, completed by people already attending.

No comparison group

Outcomes are self-reported and cross-sectional. We can describe change as experienced but not attribute it to the Pantry alone.

Representation gaps

Non-English speakers are underrepresented outside Arabic-supported sites; recall and social desirability bias

> ***Naming these limits sharpens the finding rather than weakening it — the relational outcomes hold across surveys, interviews and observation.***

Three insights for evaluators

1

Measure beyond material provision

Build outcome frameworks that include dignity, trust, connection and shifting social norms.

2

Treat place as data

Physical layout, hospitality practices and local context shape outcomes. Make systematic observation a method.

3

Use mixed methods

In this evaluation, mixed methods helped explain not only what changed but also how participants experienced that change.

These insights aren't specific to food relief. They apply wherever a service brings people into a shared place repeatedly and voluntarily — neighbourhood centres, drop-in and community hubs, playgroups, men's sheds, libraries.

A REFLECTION FOR YOUR PRACTICE

- Does your program have a place where people wait, gather or linger – and are you treating it as data?
- How would you evidence belonging, dignity or trust if a funder asked tomorrow?
- Whose outcomes are invisible in your current frame – volunteers, staff, families, the wider community?



Thankyou

You can access the full report here: https://www.anglicare.org.au/research-and-advocacy/community-pantry-report-2025/

Scan the QR code to read the full report.

