

The Manna Society

Newsletter

Summer 2011



Reflections on my first year

By

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Very soon, at the end of June, I will celebrate my first year of work for the Manna Society. As this job is my first experience of working in the area of homelessness I feel that it is a good time to share with you some reflections and what I have learnt.

Recently I have been talking with my friends about my work and I realized that there are a lot of assumptions surrounding homelessness and most of them are wrong. Homeless people are often perceived as drug/alcohol addicts, lazy, mentally ill, criminals etc. The first picture that will come to many people minds when they think about homelessness will be a dirty old man with a dog, begging in the street, sitting in a doorway. Sadly these stereotypes can be very harmful for our clients because they close many doors for them. Employers refuse to employ them, landlords refuse to rent them accommodation. It is tragic that in addition to suffering from the hardship of their condition, homeless people often feel excluded and discriminated by society. One of the local Big Issue sellers told me that he often felt like he was invisible to other people as they avoided eye contact with him when he greeted them. This social attitude leaves homeless people with a feeling of being worthless and inferior. Having said that I think that homeless people need more than just housing to overcome their homelessness. They need to have a lot of practical and emotional support to develop self-esteem and confidence in order to 'reconnect' with society.

Please spare some time reflecting what feelings comes to your mind if you think about homeless people. I am sure you will find that you hold

some preconceptions about them too. Do not worry about this as it is natural, we all do. But once you are aware of your own prejudices, you can control them, set them aside and try to see just another human being. Homeless people are not any different from those who have homes. The only difference is a lack of accommodation and that can come about for a variety of reasons. In my work I have learnt that anyone can become homeless. Often it begins with just a set of unfortunate circumstances, e.g. losing a job, or a breakdown in a relationship or because of health problems and then things accelerate. Once a person become homeless it is nearly impossible to live a normal life and it can be difficult to return to your former life easily.



Z. is well educated and dresses well; he came to the UK from Africa to join his wife, who was settled here. Initially he was given a 6 months visa with a right to apply for an extension. Unfortunately for him, the relationship broke down and his wife applied for a divorce. At present he has no status to get his visa extended as he needs his wife support. He has no place to live or no money to support

himself. A Solicitor is working on his case but it takes time to sort it out. He is sleeping rough and surviving thanks to the support of Manna and other charitable organisations.

K was living with her friend for the past 10 years. Sadly her friend passed away and the council took back her friend's property. K. became homeless whilst mourning the lost of her friend, so much to take in.

R came to London just 3 weeks ago from Italy. He saw an advertisement in an Italian website offering a job and accommodation. He paid the fee, bought a one way ticket and arrived in London to find that the advertised

accommodation and work place did not exist. He has no friends here or money to survive. Luckily someone directed him to the Manna so he will get help. I say “luckily” because I can imagine that in London there must be many people like Z. or R. who do not know where to seek assistance.

Often when people think about homelessness they have in mind a picture of a rough sleeper. In my work I have come to realize that rough sleeping is only one type of homelessness. Most newly homeless people will try to avoid sleeping on the streets as it is quite dangerous and scary. First they will try something that is called in our jargon 'sofa surfing'. It means that they move from friend to friend's house to spend a night. This is quite common for asylum seekers whose first application has been refused. I have met people who have been in the UK for many years with no status and no recourse to public funds who are living literally on the charity of their friends and people from their community.

When friends are unable to help any longer, people start to spend nights on night buses or at train stations to get some sleep in a safe place and not to attract attention. I am wondering if there is any statistics showing the number of people sleeping at bus and train stations and on buses? Do we notice them? They pretend they are travelling to get a bit of rest.

A. is a 21 years old Eritrean refugee. He arrived in the UK 2 months ago and was granted limited leave to remain. He has no family or friends here. He came to London 1 month ago from Leeds. He decided to move to London to be closer to the Eritrean Community and his church. He was told that the Manna Day Centre may be able to help him with his housing situation but no one told him that it takes time to get a place (1-2 months). At present he sleeps on buses waiting for the accommodation to become available.

S. is a 32 years old, unemployed British citizen. He had been living with his wife and 2 years old daughter when his relationship with this wife broke down and his wife asked him to leave. He went to the local council to ask for assistance but was told that he is not eligible for help as he has no priority needs. For a couple of weeks friends offered him a place to sleep but could not help him indefinitely so he moved on to the 'night buses'. We have made a couple of referrals for

him, but just like A he has to wait for a place to become available. He is very depressed and misses his wife and daughter. He cried when we first met. I am sure there are many similar cases to A. and S. in London and we are not aware of them. How miserable and lonely they must be feeling?

Lastly, homeless people are often perceived as dangerous. When I started my work for the Manna Day Centre I was introduced to our safety system. It is a little device fitted in our offices that we can press if we feel threatened. It sets off an alarm to notify other staff that their assistance is required. When our manager explained to me how it works, I felt a bit anxious so I asked if he had ever used it. He told me that he had never done so and that the alarm was merely a precautionary device. During my first year of work I have never felt threatened and have never used our alarm. My greater concern has been to control myself so as not to burst into tears while listening to the tragic stories of some of our clients. Please when you think of homeless people let their vulnerability be the first association that comes to your mind.



Policy shakeup

By

Bandi Mbuli

Manna Centre Director



We have not yet got the full picture of the impact of the benefit system reform. Some changes are expected to start as late as 2014. Other changes have already kicked in or will be rolled out gradually in the next two years. From October last year, people on the older kind of incapacity benefits are being subjected to reassessments and moved to other benefits, mostly the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Originally the Coalition Government had planned to reduce by 10% the housing benefit of all claimants of Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) after one year of claim. They have now thankfully scrapped their plan to do so. Such a plan would have almost certainly caused many to accrue rent arrears and ultimately lose their accommodation. In its place, the government plans to place the long-term unemployed into a new employment programme.

From January next year, there will be changes to the way the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) is worked out. Instead of payments being based on the average rental prices in each housing area, they will be based on the Consumer Price Index, which is a list that records the average cost of everyday household items. In addition, everyone under 35 years of age will only get LHA based on a single room in a shared house. At the moment, the age limit is set at 25. Under the new system, anyone under 35 will only be able to get a shared room rate, but not a full flat rate.

Since 1st May this year, Eastern and Central European nationals from the EU are now eligible to the same entitlements as other EU citizens, except Romanians and Bulgarians. Under the previous system they had to be in work and be registered with the Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) to be eligible for welfare benefits. The WRS has since been abolished. They still need to prove though that they are habitually residing in the UK. They can claim income-based JSA, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit as long as they meet the requirements imposed on British job seekers.

There are worrying signs that the number of rough sleepers in London is rising. In the last

quarter alone, outreach services have seen 1364 people in the streets, an increase of 16%, up from 1178 in the same quarter the year before. Every week, at least 40 new people are seen rough sleeping across London. In spite of this increase of people sleeping rough in the streets of London, hostel bed space has fallen in the past twelve months. 500 beds have been lost in London. Our own advice workers have complained that it is increasingly harder to find a hostel vacancy in London any day of the week.

The method for counting rough sleepers has long been the subject of much debate. In London, outreach services have long recorded into a shared database, managed by Broadway, all those seen rough sleeping. Services working with homeless people are able to track them down, over several months, as they deal with their problems. Data collected in this manner, which include a wide-range of contacts with people sleeping rough, from 1 week to over 6 months, well over 3000 people were recorded in 2010. However, the method of counting, used by local authorities, have tended to produce very low figures, for instance in 2010, only 440 people were counted as sleeping rough. The official counting method employed by local authorities has now changed. Unlike in the past, people seen standing near their bedding or preparing to bed down will be counted. Under the previous system, only those seen actually bedded down were counted. This change in the method for counting rough sleepers has resulted in the official estimates going up; the official count in England now stands at 1700, compared with 440 in 2010.

Job losses in the public sector and cuts in public services have not only started to affect the general public but also, particularly, homeless people and those in insecure housing. According to Homeless Link, two thirds of organisations dealing with homeless people say that they never find hostel vacancies. At the local level, some London Boroughs have shown worrying signs; Westminster Council had threatened to ban soup runs claiming that they cause litter and disturbance, and Hammersmith and Fulham Council had called for the scrapping of the duty imposed on local authorities to produce local strategies to tackle homelessness. Thankfully due to a public outcry, the ban on soup run has been shelved, and a non-legislative solution is being negotiated with soup run operators and

organisers. Other local authorities have not shown any enthusiasm to seek the abolition of the legal obligation of producing local strategies to reduce homelessness.

At the Manna Centre, we saw for several months a steep rise of people coming to us for assistance. We were dealing with an average of 250 people per day, from September 2010 to January 2011, compared with an average of 200 in the same period previously. In the last quarter, numbers have gone back to the level they are usually at, that is around 200.

The past twelve months have been eventful for homeless people and organisations working with them. We have continued to see the welfare reform agenda being incrementally introduced and implemented by the coalition government gradually taking shape. But it is still too early, at this stage, to tell conclusively what its full impact will be in the next few years on vulnerable people.

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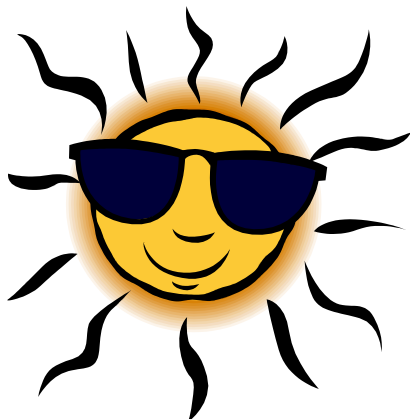
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Two faces of immigration

By

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Looking at the situation in France, Germany, United Kingdom and Italy it is obvious that the governments of these countries are struggling with the issue of immigration. Rough sleeping immigrants can be seen bedding down in the heart of some of their biggest cities. The problem seems to be very difficult and complex.

Occasionally immigrants organise protests and fight against a government's decisions and the hard circumstances in which they find themselves.

Recently the case of removing Romanian Gypsies from France was widely discussed.

Homeless immigrants in France are being offered 300 Euros to leave and not return within the next 5 years. In the UK legal immigrants such as those from the A10 countries are given 3 months to become stable and financially independent. After this period those who have not managed to do so and are sleeping rough may be repatriated and returned to their home country. It has been my experience however that some of those who have been removed simply come back to the UK. Presumably those responsible for immigration try to establish a reasonable policy to resolve the problem but as the issue is a very delicate and complicated one, it is not easy to find a coherent solution.

I think that most fair minded people would agree that neither the United Kingdom nor indeed any other country should take responsibility for those from abroad who only wish to take advantage of the benefit system. However we should support people who experience real obstacles in getting into employment. How do you distinguish between those who have just chosen an easy life - not taking responsibility for anything they do and those who are genuinely struggling to find employment but have failed to do so? Such a judgment is a very difficult one to make as a person's true intentions can be hard to know.

It is undoubtedly true that immigrants may cause problems but they also bring real benefits with them too. The majority of immigrants who come to the UK do so to find work and to live here honestly; to develop new friendships and to

contribute to the country. Often they take jobs that British nationals do not want to carry out. They work hard and show a responsible, flexible and positive attitude. They also bring cultural diversity and an opportunity for us all to be more tolerant, open minded and compassionate. Characteristics that we all should aim to develop.

Diversity gives exceptional opportunities, stimulates thinking, and opens new paths. London having such different inhabitants seems to be a piece of a new world. We all here have a great chance to get rid of fear of the other, the unknown, and through respecting differences to grow personally and spiritually. If we all opened our hearts, we may find that our differences actually lead us towards happiness and inner balance. Being open to someone whom we may not initially understand lets the Spirit into our minds and hearts.

Since the expansion of Europe in May 2004, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Czechs and nationals from the other four new accession countries, have been travelling to the UK looking for a better life. Some people in the UK do not like these new immigrants. But simply imagine a healthy cow in the meadow... if all the grass has been consumed around the cow, the animal will move to another part of the meadow, providing no fence has been installed. It was the UK's decision to open its borders to A8 nationals. No fence, no obstacles – the hungry cow moves on. I do not mean any offence in comparing immigrants to a cow, I just wish to illustrate that this is a law of nature - we all want to improve our lives. A healthy human being always watches out for an opportunity to improve his/her circumstances. Governments are responsible for immigration policy, not the immigrants themselves.

I have come across people who have expressed an intense dislike, even hate against a particular nation or race. However when one comes to know another person and hears their individual story, deeper and more positive emotions arise. We can identify with the other on a human level, we see a fellow human being, not a Jew, or a Pole, or a German etc. Everyone who has seen the movie “American History X” will understand what I am talking about.

To support what I've just said I would like to introduce you to a person whom I've met

through my work here. When G first approached our A10 advice service she was quite scared and had her friend with her all the time. Although she could communicate in Russian, a language she knows very well (she is from Lithuania), she needed support from another Manna client in order to come to the advice office. Her story was so moving I struggled to keep my emotions in check.

G is a tiny, intelligent, warm lady; aged 58 who had become homeless. Thankfully this was only for a very short period of time. She had spent a few hours with no roof over her head and no place to go until she was saved by W. Someone had told W that a woman was sitting crying on a bench near Sainsbury's in East London. When he approached her he found out that she was homeless and her bag had been stolen by two youngsters a few minutes earlier. After W listened to her story he made a spontaneous and wonderful decision – he took her with him and offered her a place in his squat. He is young enough to be her son (he is 40) and they now see one another as family. When you see them together they are like close relatives. There is a reason for me telling you this story – I hope that by telling you about G's qualifications and experience someone may offer her a job.



Why did G come to the UK? She studied at Saint Petersburg University and became a professional pattern cutter and dress maker. She set up her own business making wedding

dresses and used to employ a number of workers. Her business ran smoothly for some time but she started losing employees when Latvia joined the European Union. It was not because of a lack of customers as the services G provided attracted clients but because of the changing economic circumstances she had to cut her prices considerably. This, plus high taxes prevented her from paying her workers sufficiently and her

business struggled to survive. Some of her employees immigrated to the UK and one of her friends encouraged her to do the same.

Initially, everything went well as G was lucky to obtain a job as a pattern cutter. However once her employer decided to close his business she ran into difficulties. Her savings were enough to cover 2 months rent. She found a job doing alterations but only received £50 for two days hard work. She then tried a cleaning job but without the necessary experience and being so tiny and delicate she failed to carry out the cleaning duties properly. Eventually, a scary day had come; she was told she had to vacate her room. Crying and with no idea where to go she took her suitcase and went on to the streets. Luckily, a few hours later angels sent W to help her.

G is a professional pattern cutter with considerable experience. If anyone knows where she might find employment please let me know. G has great potential and I believe it would be a pleasure to work with her.



Homeless People's Commission

By

Margaret Shapland

Welfare & Advice Worker



"The only source of knowledge is experience"

Albert Einstein

This year saw the publication of the first report by the "Homeless People's Commission", a group of 14 individuals across the country who have experienced homelessness. It was based on wide-ranging research and published 93 recommendations. Its findings are due to be presented to a Ministerial working group meeting.

This was a very broad-ranging report. The recommendations put a great deal of focus on self-help and also on the cost benefits of preventing homelessness when it is put into context with the much greater costs that come with increased use of the NHS and the far greater propensity to become involved with the criminal justice system. In this article I am going to focus on 19 (of the 46) priority recommendations and those that resonate particularly with me as a worker in the homelessness sector.

Prevention of Homelessness

- Better information on help available from councils & homelessness agencies to enable access before point of homelessness
- Provision of a comprehensive housing options service and a complete record kept on all persons presenting as homeless/at risk
- Clear referral routes for GPs to services for problems that create homelessness – drug & alcohol advice, relationship counselling, gambling and housing advice

One of the most regrettable situations we meet with is that of clients coming to our service having already left properties where they might have been served with an eviction notice, for which we might have been able to arrange legal representation or have helped the client write a "defence" to be submitted to the court; they may also have left a tenancy as the holder of the tenancy has died and they do not understand the rules relating to tenancy succession. We also

find still that many local authorities will deflect homeless applications without providing full advice to the client – this goes against the Code of Practice for local authorities on homelessness. Finally, we know GPs can be the first line of defence against issues that may lead to homelessness and getting people into treatment can help reduce the possibilities of them becoming homeless

Temporary Accommodation

- Places of Change standards to be applied to all new hostels. New hostels should be small, separating specialist needs from low support clients
- More emergency beds allowing immediate access, with more in cold weather
- Three tier approach in hostels built on resident life-cycle – arrival in chaotic state, stabilise, move on. Ensure that holistic support plans are put together and build in peer support in form of peer mentors or buddies to give practical support. Contract on outcomes to be agreed between hostel staff and resident and reviewed regularly
- Move people out as soon as they are able to sustain independent housing – aim for six months but residents can stay longer if required

I have lived in a hostel and the old adage “small is beautiful” definitely applies to hostels – when they get too big, they become unmanageable and more chaotic. We struggle with emergency beds to just keep people safe and reduce the potential for a street lifestyle to be adopted. Given the fact that we have little control over the supply of homeless accommodation and the demand, we find ourselves having to ask people to join waiting lists for longer-term accommodation; more availability of emergency accommodation to take people for say two months as, depending on their circumstances, this can be the length of time it takes to put a low support individual into accommodation.

I think the idea of creating a holistic life plan with agreed goals and outcomes can help drive people forward and ensure that they try and achieve their goals – the contract idea treats people as equals with both parties shouldering responsibilities and moving people on in a relatively short space of time is really desirable

as it prevents people becoming institutionalised and prevents hostels from silting up as they cannot move people on.

Resettlement Work

- Vulnerable people should have access to floating support before they move into private rented accommodation
- Before moving into a tenancy, service users should be helped to make a two year financial plan by trained key workers

Having good floating support to sustain a tenancy can be the difference between success and failure - there is such a noticeable difference between clients who take advantage of support offered through a tenancy sustainment team and those who access it sporadically (usually in a crisis). It also enables a buffer between the landlord and the tenant and enables the resettled client to get advice and support to manage the relationship with the landlord. Clients can sometimes be unrealistic about the costs involved in supporting themselves in an independent tenancy – getting used to budgeting and how financial resources might be used is an invaluable tool for anyone. It also helps people to look ahead rather than just in the moment to a point in time when their circumstances might have changed quite radically – they may be working, for example.

Settled Housing

- There should be clearer information so that people can understand who fits the criteria for social housing

We have found many clients who have felt that because they are homeless, the local authority should help them into accommodation or help them find accommodation – this is not the case. We have written about this in the past and there is certainly an entitlement for the available options to be explained to them and local authorities have a duty to provide such assistance. That said, when it comes to judging whether individuals should be regarded as priority need, although the criteria are spelled out usually on the local authorities website, the threshold for fitting into the category of “vulnerability” due to physical health, mental health or other issues can seem to be a “moveable feast”. We have certainly had experience of clients being turned down initially

as not being vulnerable enough to meet these criteria and it is only when we have challenged this opinion that the local authority is persuaded to change its mind.

Self-help

- More sharing of information with peers in group sessions, signposting them to other services and help empower people to move on
- Jobcentres should help people to find voluntary work if this is the best immediate option for them and provide reasonable financial incentives that don't affect their benefits

More than ever, given the cuts in services that would provide advice and information to clients are becoming more in evidence, the more that service users and clients can be empowered to support each other, the more powerful and confident they will become as self-advocates – that can only be a good thing.

I personally feel that placing people in voluntary work is such a valuable stepping stone toward and I know many who have moved back into the workplace as a result of undertaking this work. The jobcentres should see voluntary work as part of the pathway instead of sometimes considering it as an indication that the client should start being “hassled” to get into work. Volunteering can be an invaluable way in which people can “up skill” or acquire new skills making them more attractive in the job market. An incentive to enter into volunteering from the jobcentre could be more valuable and less costly to the public purse than some of the training establishments that the DWP uses.

Welfare Benefits

- Information on benefits should be more accessible and easy to understand. Jobcentre staff should be required to inform customers of all the benefits to which they are entitled
- DWP should identify lessons from good practice in effective Jobcentres with national good practice standards independently audited for consistency across all offices
- All claims should be paid and appeals decided within one week, with interim payments if there is any delay. Crisis loan decisions made the same day,

including a decision on reviews. There should be a staff member available to make immediate decisions on urgent matters

- Benefit payments should not be suspended for minor infringements, accidental errors on the form or changes of circumstances that have not been checked
- People should be able to earn up to £60 a week (income disregard) before losing benefit
- People on contribution based benefits should be able to access other benefits available to those who have not worked, such as the social fund and travel costs, so that they are not worse off than people who have not worked
- Any cut in Housing Benefit after one year on JSA should not apply to people who are actively seeking a reasonable and appropriate job offer

Much of the above would make the job of the homeless advisor a great deal easier – with the introduction of Universal Credit, we may see more transparency and joined up working in the allocation of benefits and range of benefits awarded. Jobcentres and individuals working within the DWP have such differing standards that it is difficult to credit that you are talking to the same organisation and faster turnaround of benefits would help us in trying to place clients into accommodation. The turnaround for appeals and tribunals can now mean that clients may be waiting months on a reduced benefit or no benefits (if they have been sanctioned), which can result in real financial hardship. There does need to be some movement with a sliding scale of earnings vis-à-vis benefits, so that transition to a benefit-free environment makes it easier for the client to return to the workplace without incurring debt. If people are making genuine attempts to seek work, then cutting housing benefit in a peremptory manner after one year does not take account of the individual circumstances that client may be facing.

You can access the report at www.groundswell.org.uk, and you yourself can judge which of the recommendations you feel are most important to tackling homelessness.