

MANNA

CENTRE

*The Manna Society
Newsletter
Summer 2013*



First impressions

By
Ellen Burns

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



I arrived at the Manna Centre for my interview for the position of Housing and Welfare Advice Worker just after the lunch service. I nervously opened one of the twin red doors – hoping it was the right one - and found myself in a startlingly big room - a large dining hall - lit from high up windows. It was noisy and packed full of mainly men eating, chatting and definitely ‘bustling’.

On explaining I was there for an interview, one of the Project Workers – who I now know as the Senior Project Worker Billy – asked in his friendly Scottish accent if I would like a tea or coffee whilst I waited. He has a certain hard-to-define manner which immediately puts you at your ease. I said yes to coffee, and was presented with a large ‘builders’ mug, plus a *huge* chunk of panettone, and sat and chatted with Manna Centre clients till I was called. This was my first impression of the Manna Centre and it was perfectly accurate – bustling, busy, down-to-earth, practical, very welcoming, very friendly, and not a place you will be hungry in for more than a few seconds.

I have now been in my role for 3 months. I joined the advice team consisting of Margaret and Karolina, and the first few weeks were a process of relentless learning from them. Thankfully, as I now have a handle on the basics, this process has slowed to a non-brain-devastating tempo, but it continues every day, and I imagine it will for a long time to come. What I love about working at the Manna Centre is the trust your colleagues place in you, and the freedom you are given to develop yourself as an advice worker in a way that best matches your personality. I have been encouraged, and given free rein, to visit the different services that we refer clients to – hostels, charities that help people access affordable private rented accommodation, emergency night shelters for

people with no access to public funds, local authorities, and so on.

By visiting these places, and talking to the staff there in person, I have vastly expanded my mental map of the services that exist across London to help homeless people. It is crucial to have this knowledge easily accessible when faced with the individual client in the advice session, so that you can mentally scroll through the services that will realistically be able to help them – rather than only scrolling through sometimes out-of-date information on the computer screen. It feels great to know that I am trusted to spend my time wisely in actively building my knowledge base, for the benefit of Manna clients.

So far I have made innumerable applications to appropriate hostels, spent a lot of time explaining clearly and simply the various housing options that exist in London and their pros and cons, signposted people to health services that do not require an address, referred people to mental health services, provided funds for travel to and from employment and passport appointments, made benefit applications for clients, and referred countless people to rough sleeping outreach teams.

I can’t imagine many less boring, or more satisfying, jobs than spending your day finding creative solutions to these kinds of practical problems. You never know what situation is going to come through the door next – amongst my many human clients I have also negotiated free temporary housing for a cat (at a cat charity run by ex-supermodel Celia Hammond!), giving her owner more time and breathing space to find somewhere that they can both live.

The Manna Centre helps people in crisis in a myriad of concrete, practical ways every day. They also provide a warm, welcoming, stable and non-judgmental environment which seems to encourage people to open up and feel safe enough to ask for help. I feel privileged to have joined such an organisation, and look forward with excitement to my future here.



Acknowledgement: All of the photos in this newsletter were taken by Tricia de Courcy Ling

Manna Centre Clients Survey results Thursday 23rd May 2013

	Numbers using centre	%
Male	198	93
Female	14	7
Sleeping Rough	92	43
Council/HA flat	64	30
Hostel	22	10
Friends	19	9
Squat	12	6
Other	3	1
Ethnic Origin		%
English	61	29
A10 Countries	56	26
European	32	15
African	24	11
South American	9	4
Black British	7	3
Irish	6	3
Black Caribbean	5	2
Other	5	2
Asian	4	2
Scottish	3	1

N.B: An additional 4 people did not wish to participate in the survey



In receipt of benefits	%
105	49
No income	
104	49
Other income	
3	1



Poverty, Participation & Choice

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



“For those who are able to work, work has to be seen as the best route out of poverty. For work is not just about more money - it is transformative. It's about taking responsibility for yourself and your family”

Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

For many of us who are lucky to have or to be able to find work where we are able to make ends meet, the above is most certainly true **but from my experience in working with our clients, the kind of work that they are offered, the number of hours of work they can find or their other commitments such as childcare mean that though they are seeking to take responsibility for themselves and those who depend upon them, they are just not able to earn enough.**

A Story of Hope

Let me tell you about a client who I met today – who happens to be called Hope. She is a woman with two young children aged 8 and 4 years old. She has been staying in a house from which she rented a room where she was living with her two children. She has a small job earning about £161 per week as a cleaner but it varies as sometimes the agency has more work for her and sometimes less. She receives Child Benefit for her two children which gives her an extra £33.70 per week. So, in the best weeks, she has an income of around £194.70 or £843.70 in a month gross. In some weeks, she has so little income she needs to take advantage of Jobseekers Allowance to top up her earnings. She cannot work many more hours as she cannot afford the cost of childcare for her younger child and has run through almost all of what little savings she had to support this little family. At the moment, she is not accessing all the benefits that she is entitled to but we have a more pressing situation to contend with and a welfare benefits check is a piece of work that we will do later.

Her immediate situation is that the man from whom she has been renting a room has become so abusive towards her and her children as he wants her to leave the property that she has

become homeless. It was an informal arrangement and she cannot prove to the local authority that she has a local connection nor has she been in the borough long enough to be considered to have a local connection so that she and her children would be housed by the local authority or assisted into accommodation. She is also very fearful that if she approaches the authorities, they will focus on separating her from her children, despite our reassurances to the contrary.

We got lucky in that we have a super landlord/estate agent who just happened to have a one bedroom flat and was prepared to accept a small deposit of just £500 for a flat costing £800 per month (normally most landlords would be looking at an up-front payment of £1600 to secure the property) – she has a little money from her savings so she can afford the small deposit though we would be willing to help either through external funds or through a small trust grant we have to assist individuals into accommodation. We sent her to see it today and we hope that will mean that she and her children have a roof over their head.

She will get assistance with Working and Child Tax Credit, help with housing costs through Housing Benefit and help with Council Tax. The issue for her is that she had little support in terms of understanding what benefits are available to her, was so very stressed by her housing situation that she was not able to really focus and that the work she is able to do as a cleaner is not particularly well-paid, she can do limited hours as a lone parent and the income was just not enough to support herself and her children.

In circumstances like this, I was unsurprised to read in The Independent about the recent Oxfam and Church Action against Poverty report which stated that over 500,000 people in Britain are now accessing food banks. I went to a large supermarket while I was on annual leave last week where food bank volunteers were giving shoppers a list of items needed so that as they did their shopping people could contribute by adding a few additional items from the list. I don't have a family to look after but as I went around, I was able to get an insight into how much a food bill would be for a family – the average according to a report in The Telegraph, is now £77 per week (which seems conservative to me).

But let us move on.

Being “in and out of work” – the story of Frederick

We placed Frederick in accommodation while he was still receiving Jobseeker’s Allowance at which point, he would receive full housing benefit. We helped him with all the applications for Housing Benefit. But at the end of March, his circumstances changed in that he started to work but his income between the end-March and end-May has varied between just over £60 per week and at its maximum, £120 gross per week as a kitchen porter. For three weeks over this period, he was offered no work at all, so Jobseeker’s Allowance should step in to fill that gap.

Managing these calculations would be difficult enough but Frederick forgot about the knock-on effect on his Housing Benefit which as a means tested benefit relies on very accurate information regarding income. He had also not responded due to lack of understanding (English not being his first language) to letters from Housing Benefit requesting information about earnings. He has now run up almost 3 months of arrears with his rent and understandably his landlord is worried. We have now done a fresh Housing Benefit claim; got full details of all the monies he has been paid and can submit this to the Housing Benefit department, where hopefully it will be backdated.

The problem with our benefits system is that it feels inflexible and bureaucratic and hard to understand and this is a particular problem for people who are in work intermittently or whose hours differ from one week to another. It can help create barriers for good honest people who want to work and contribute and indeed, it can create situations in which they run into arrears and maybe homelessness through trying to negotiate their way through the system, so working can seem almost detrimental to their well-being.

When I see people struggle like this to make a meaningful life for themselves and their children, I feel a sense of frustration about our society. A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation - Poverty, Participation and Choice - found that about one-third of people in Britain are excluded from fully participating in society, to quote from the report: *“The 30 percent of people with the lowest incomes are forced to*

choose between the basic necessities of life; they must decide which needs to neglect”

Depending on which source you use, we are around the sixth largest economy in the world by GDP (Gross Domestic Product) but according to OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the gap between rich and poor has grown faster in Britain than any other developed country.

I think about society as a whole offering equal opportunity to everyone but that cannot be a reality if the essence of the report from The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is to be believed. The Roman poet, Juvenal writing in the late 1st and 2nd century AD wrote *“It is not easy for men to rise whose qualities are thwarted by poverty”* Where people are simply trying to exist, their energies are devoted to that sole aim. We owe it to them and to society as a whole to help them do more than that. I consider our mission in some small way is to be a place where that help can be found.



The welfare reform: A challenge to us all!

**By
Bandi Mubi
Manna Centre Director**



Campaigners have largely been critical of the current welfare reform. They generally say that it will increase poverty and unjustly hit claimants left workless through no fault of their own. Our own position has been quite nuanced, acknowledging the need for reform and yet insisting that it should still be guided by fairness and compassion.

A recent survey conducted by Opinion Matters¹ seems to confirm the government's claims that their reform of the welfare benefits system is popular with the public. Their findings, for instance, show that 87 per cent of Londoners are in favour of limiting overall benefit payments. Nationwide attitudes were almost identical to those in London. They come amidst reports indicating that the Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, is preparing to further cut the welfare budget by up to £3 billion as part of the spending review for 2015/16.

It is difficult to assess the impact of these cuts and changes nationally. But our own recent internal snapshot survey (see page 3) indicates a sharp increase in the number of people seeking our help, by 30%. 216 people used our day centre on the day the survey was conducted (23rd May), compared to 166 people when a similar survey was held last year in October.

At a time of general economic turmoil, when a significant number of people feel the pinch, it is very easy for us all to jump onto the bandwagon. For policy-makers it is very tempting to do what is most popular. But they must beware that that public opinion shifts over time and it can be costlier, in the long run, to seek short-term political gains. For Christians and people of goodwill, we should be led by principles of justice and love for all, not just for the well off but also for people affected by these changes. We mustn't always conform to the current trend. We must often be non-conformists in order to keep our saltiness, to paraphrase Jesus.

¹ London support Government's £26,000 benefits cap, Evening Standard, 29 May 2013

Such a principled approach is not new to Christianity or all the great religions of the world. Indeed it is espoused by all people of goodwill. As we seek to balance off society's responsibility to assist people in poverty with greater personal responsibility, other factors have to be born in mind. We should be careful that greater personal responsibility in policy-making does not lead to greater inequality. Such an outcome may end up costing society even more. Many studies have shown that severe income inequality leads to more social problems². So any savings made may be wiped out by the cost of redressing mounting social problems.

There is no easy answer for reforming the welfare system. But there are prevailing principles that must be factored in. Among those must be justice and love for all. Certainly, the popularity of any policy change should not be the sole basis on which it is carried out. Our opinions often change, but our overriding principles tend to remain the same over time. They're a better compass.



² Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), The Spirit Level

Desiderata

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Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter;

for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery.

But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself.

Especially, do not feign affection.

Neither be critical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings.

Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.

AGM Invitation
Please come along to
the
Manna Society's
Annual General
Meeting
on Wednesday 2nd
October
at 7.00pm.
At The Manna Centre.

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MOST NEEDED ITEMS

TINS OF VEGETABLES
TINS OF FRUIT

