

The Manna Society Newsletter

Summer 2014



New beginnings

By

Paddy Boyle

Administrator



Thirty two years ago Nannette Ffrench was given the keys to our present building – 6 Melior Street, London SE1. The keys were given to her by Bishop Henderson, the then area Bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark. The building was an old nursery school. The building was and continues to be owned by the RC Diocese of Southwark.

The Diocese have very kindly given us the building rent free for the last 32 years. To give you some idea how incredibly generous an offer this is – I asked a local Estate Agent how much would the market rent be for a building this size and in this location – he estimated it would be approximately £150,000 per year. So as you can see the Diocese have been extremely generous to us over the years. Without their generosity none of what we have achieved in the last 32 years would have been possible.

The Diocese approached us about five years ago and asked us if we would be willing to move to another location in Melior Street as they wishes to redevelop the site on which our building, the old banking college and Fr Michael's presbytery sits. In light of our history with the Diocese and the understanding that the Diocese would remain our landlord, we were and are happy to oblige.

After many meetings and much toing and froing between the developers and the local council's planning department, the plans for the new development were passed in March this year. The new development will have 37 flats and a number of small shops and businesses. The Manna Centre will move into the old banking college in Melior Street. The building will be refurbished and most of our operations will be on the ground and first floor of the new building. Three of our six offices will be new (as opposed to being refurbished) and will be located on the way into the new centre. Our computer suite will also be separate from the main centre itself. It will be in Fr Michael's Parish Hall.

Whilst the floor space for the new centre is similar to our present centre, the new centre will not be as bright and airy. There are two main reasons for this. One, our present centre's ceiling is about 15 feet high and has very large windows. The new centre's ceiling will be approximately half this height. The reason for the reduction is because we've had to put in a mezzanine floor in order to store our foodstuffs (approximately 40,000 cans of food). The mezzanine will cover approximately 80% of the dining room area. The second reason for less light is because of the new flats opposite our new building.

We will continue to offer our all of our services (with the exception of the furniture store as already mentioned) – food, showers, clothing, housing & welfare advice, medical care and access to computers in the new centre. We also envisage catering for the same number of clients as we have at present i.e. 150-200 each day. Our 7 day opening will also remain unchanged. If everything goes according to plan we should move into our new building sometime in 2015.

The only reason we have been able to provide these services for the last 32 years is because of you, our supporters. We are merely the conduit through which your concern for those in need is made real. We are very thankful for your support and pray that you will continue to support us as we enter this new chapter.



Reflection on Housing Benefit changes

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



As some of you may be aware, there have been some major changes introduced to Housing Benefit on 1st of April 2014. They affect access to Housing Benefit for migrants from European Economic Area (EEA). These changes have had an enormous impact on the work of everyone who works with the homeless as they restrict further housing options available for homeless EEA migrants.

Housing Benefit is a benefit, managed by local councils, for people on a low income to help them pay their rent. You may be able to get Housing Benefit if you are on other benefits, work part-time or work full-time on a low income. Before 1st of April 2014 migrants from the EEA countries could access this benefit, so our work was focused on: 1. finding a landlord, who would accept housing benefit as a way to pay rent 2. applying for various grants and loans to help pay the deposit or rent in advance for our clients. From the start of April, new jobseekers will no longer be able to access Housing Benefit if they are claiming income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).

There are two types of Jobseeker Allowance: income based and contribution based. You could get contribution based JSA if you have paid enough Class 1 National Insurance contribution in the last 2 tax years. Contribution-based Jobseeker's Allowance is paid for a maximum of 182 days (approximately six months). After that, you may get income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, depending on your income and savings.

The idea behind these reforms is '*...to ensure we have a fair system – one which provides support for genuine workers and jobseekers, but does not allow people to come to our country and take advantage of our benefits system*' as '*The British public are rightly concerned that migrants should contribute to this country, and not be drawn here by the attractiveness of our benefits system*' (Ian Duncan Smith, Work and Pension Secretary). In other words only those EEA migrants who have contributed to the social security system should be able to profit from it, which seems to me quite right. However what I don't like, is the way these

reforms were implemented, leaving so many unclear areas and therefore making our work very difficult. In addition the Department for Work and Pension and Housing Benefit first line staff does not seem to be trained well to advise clients on those changes.

Let me give you an example to illustrate how those changes affected our work: Paulo is Spanish, 45 years old. He came to the UK 6 months ago to look for work. His friends offered him accommodation for two months until he could find a job and be able to rent accommodation for himself. He has never worked in the UK before. Unfortunately, it took longer than he had expected to find a job and his friends asked him to leave, so he became homeless. We assisted him to apply for Jobseeker Allowance and once it was awarded referred him to a private landlord. He was lucky to get a place and apply for Housing Benefit before 1st April 2014. His claim has been accepted and his rent is now paid by Housing Benefit so he has time to look for employment. He has never contributed to the social security system and he now receives £72.40 of Jobseekers money per week and about £180 in Housing Benefit plus he is eligible for free NHS services (dental care, prescriptions, eye tests). I can see why that may seem unfair to those who have contributed to the system and why there has had to be changes.

If Paul did not find accommodation before 1st April, he would not be eligible for Housing Benefit and therefore we would be very limited in the housing options we could offer him. His options would be limited to either a short stay in a night shelter in the hope that he could find a job in the very near future or reconnection to Spain. Two potential difficulties with the first option are: 1. it is difficult to find a place in a night shelter and 2. night shelters only offer accommodation for a short period of time – would Paul be able to find a job and save for deposit for a cheap room within a month?

Reconnection? Reconnection means that Paul will be linked with a special service that will help him to return to his home country. Paul does not want to go back to Spain. Why? He has a family there: a wife and 3 kids. He has been unemployed there for quite a while and struggled to support his family. He took the decision to come to the UK in the hope of finding a job and being able to support his

family. He borrowed money from his friends to buy a ticket for a flight and to survive for the first month. If he returns to Spain he would be in a worst position that he was before he left because he will have a debt to pay. Please forgive my digression here - I feel that when you get to know an individual's story the certainty that you had before e.g. if you don't contribute to the system you should not be in the country, becomes less clear.

Luckily Paul found accommodation before the 1st April and is doing very well in his job search. He is now under "transitional protection" which means that he will continue to receive Housing Benefit. EEA Nationals who were already getting JSA and HB on the 31st March 2014 will continue to do so (they will have "transitional protection"). This protection will last until there is a break in their JSA or HB claim. The most likely ways for this break to happen to Paul are:

1. he gets a job or 2. he moves to another local authority. I will not explore option 2 as we already know what will happen – Paul will be in the same situation as if he started his claim after 1st April.

Let's imagine that Paul found himself a job. Paul can continue to receive Housing Benefit if his earnings are at least £153 per week. If they are less he will need to undergo a further assessment to establish if the work he is doing is "genuine" and "effective". The terms "genuine and effective" are not defined in law so each case will be judged on its individual merits. This makes it a difficult area to advise clients on.

Let's be positive and imagine that Paul got a job and earns over £150 per week. What would happen if he loses his job? Once Paul's employment ceases, he may be entitled to HB for a maximum of six months, depending on whether his job ended voluntarily or involuntarily. However the six months' time limit can be extended in cases where there is compelling evidence that somebody is likely to find a job shortly. Once again another misty area for advising clients.

Taking into account that many of our clients comes from the EEA, we are going to face a challenge in the advice service soon. We need to bear in mind that there are many EEA citizens already in receipt of Housing Benefit and that the transitional protection will not last forever.

PEOPLE WHO USED THE MANNA CENTRE ON

| | Numbers using centre | % |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| Male | 173 | 94 |
| Female | 11 | 6 |
| | | |
| Sleeping Rough | 84 | 45 |
| Council/HA flat | 52 | 28 |
| Hostel | 31 | 17 |
| Friends | 11 | 6 |
| Squat | 5 | 3 |
| Other | 1 | 1 |
| | | |
| Ethnic Origin | | % |
| English | 60 | 32 |
| A10 Countries | 51 | 28 |
| European | 20 | 11 |
| African | 19 | 10 |
| Irish | 11 | 6 |
| Asian | 10 | 5 |
| Scottish | 5 | 3 |
| South American | 4 | 2 |
| Black British | 3 | 2 |
| Black Caribbean | 1 | 1 |

FRIDAY 9TH MAY 2014

| In receipt of benefits | % |
|------------------------|-----------|
| 94 | 51 |
| No income | |
| 87 | 47 |
| Other income | |

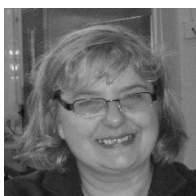


Benefits sanctions & their impact

By

Margaret Shpland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



“60% of appeals against Jobseekers Allowance sanctions succeed. The success rate of sanction appeals reveals a culture of ‘sanction first and ask questions later’. This is not only ineffective and a huge waste of money but also has a devastating effect on thousands of people’s lives” – Gillian Guy, Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Service

In this article, I want to cover a number of bases inspired by what I have been reading in the papers or research has been recently published.

The impact of benefit sanctions on the homeless

Homeless Link has recently published a piece of work looking at how sanctions impacted on the lives of those who are homeless or vulnerably housed. A sanction is a financial penalty visited on a Jobseeker Allowance claimant or Employment and Support Allowance if the Department of Work and Pensions deem that the claimant has not fulfilled a commitment to seek work or other requirement. It can mean that they lose their only source of income - that is, their personal benefit - for two weeks, four weeks or even up to 28 weeks. Across the total population of claimants 3% receive a sanction on their benefit. Within the homeless population, that percentage soars – a third of those claiming JSA have experienced a sanction and 1 in 5 of those claiming ESA. This can have really significant impacts on those people’s lives. As an advice worker I see the impacts on a regular basis and I want to talk a little about this.

Clark – Too vulnerable to handle DWP request

For many years, I worked with one of our older service users who was claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance. He is a gentleman who had been a long term rough sleeper and re-housed – let’s call him Clark. He has some behavioural problems which mean that when stressed, he can get very agitated and angry; he has problems in understanding the contract he had with the jobcentre to attend one of the organisations who are supposed to be helping people to get back into work – we suspect he has learning difficulties – he missed meetings and simply was not able to fulfil the requirements. He ended up being repeatedly sanctioned and because once his JSA stopped, his housing benefit

also stopped and he ran up significant rent arrears. His immediate reaction to being chased to resolve these arrears is to consider giving up the tenancy and returning to the streets – so, we might have had a quite vulnerable individual nearing pension age going back on the streets.

Luckily we were able to avoid that; thankfully, his benefit adviser was empathetic enough to realise that Clark was not wilfully failing to fulfil, he just did not quite “get” what he needed to do. We did step in and to keep a roof over his head and to reduce his immediate stress, we worked with his housing provider and local authority housing benefit department to explain his circumstances and why he did not reply to any of their letters and submitted “nil income” claims so that his housing benefit was covered and a roof was kept over his head. Clark had never registered with a GP and so we went with him to register him and get him evaluated by a specialist service who determined that he did have special needs and really was not fit for work, so we were able to get his benefit changed to ESA. Thankfully, we did not have to go through the whole ATOS interview process as not long after he reached pensionable age and moved on to Pension Credit.

To bring us back to this report, Homeless Link recommends that: *“Ensure benefit conditionality is appropriate to individuals’ needs and realistically reflects their ability to meet these. In developing or reviewing policy on benefit conditionality – including the claimant commitment – we urge DWP to better take into account the difficulties faced by homeless people with complex needs, such as mental health, substance use, literacy or learning difficulties, in complying with benefit requirements. Guidance should make provision for exemptions or special terms for vulnerable homeless people who need more support in complying with requirements” – Homeless Link: a High Cost to Pay*

Theo – A need for empathy and communication

Another segment of the homeless population mentioned in Homeless Link’s research is migrant workers. The research identified that in their sample, 13% of ESA claimants and 19% of JSA claimants from Central and Eastern European and migrant workers had been sanctioned over the last three months.

We have seen this at first hand and our advice staff invests a lot of time trying to help these clients.

One particular case – Theo – comes to mind. He comes from Romania and before the change in circumstances earlier this year applying to Romanian and Bulgarian nationals had been trying his level best to work in the UK. He had worked two jobs – ferreting around for scrap metal which he could then sell on to a recognised scrap metal dealer (all obtained legitimately, I might add) and selling The Big Issue, which he did but he was under continual harassment at his “pitch” by local gangs who considered him fair game and would run off with his supplies of the magazine, thus costing him money as he had to invest in purchasing the magazines to then sell them on and preventing him from earning a living.

He is currently claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance but approached us saying that he was very stressed and although he was trying to do what the Jobcentre wanted him to do he was failing and was under threat of a sanction. Theo can speak English but he is held back as he cannot read and write in English – indeed, he cannot read and write in his own language. These days getting a job relies on being able to competently use electronic methods and being able to read and understand texts from prospective employers. The DWP adviser was seemingly unsympathetic to his efforts.

We wrote a letter on his behalf and explained the problems that Theo was having and some of the ways we had suggested to him to make his jobsearch more effective and asking that the prospective sanction be put to one side to allow him to demonstrate that he was putting these suggestions into practice and requesting that he be referred to an ESOL course aimed at enabling him to write and read in English. He already uses our Education and Training service for improving his IT skills. If he had been sanctioned he would still have been asked to fulfil the requirements of his Jobseeker’s contract and that would mean being able to travel to interviews or to places where he could get internet access but without the financial means to do it. He is street homeless so it is even more difficult for him. I am glad that the DWP responded in a positive manner and he now has been enrolled in an ESOL course.

To come back to the Homeless Link report, they recommended: *“Joint Work with Jobcentre Plus and local homelessness services to improve personal advisors’ understanding of homelessness*

and the difficulties homeless people may face in complying with benefits conditions. This should include specific training on homelessness and more clarity for advisors about when to make allowances for homeless claimants’ personal circumstances that may lead to them becoming sanctioned. DWP Partnership managers are well placed to support this work” Homeless Link: A High Cost to Pay

Reina – the high cost of disability

I move away here from the issue of sanctions but want to examine the “benefit tourism” argument. The migrants that I see are mostly committed to finding work and let me tell you the story of one – Reina. Reina is a Spanish citizen. Before she came to the UK, she had made enquiries about where she could find work and due to the parlous economic situation in Spain, she came here to find work. She comes originally from the Dominican Republic but because of her strong ties in Spain was entitled to hold a Spanish passport. We have noticed that many of the clients we see from Spain especially have come originally from former Spanish colonies and came to Spain during the good years to pick up work in a good economy. When the Spanish economy went south, they were the first group to be affected, so they have moved to an economy (United Kingdom) where we have growth. She got herself two jobs as a cleaner and we placed her in shared housing and for a long time, we did not see Reina.

Then disaster struck. She was travelling on a bus and as she stood up to get off at her stop, the bus braked suddenly and she was thrown forward. It was a few days later that the pain in her knee and leg made it clear that there was a real problem. She went to her GP who advised her not to work. She continued to work as she was afraid not to and just coped with her health problem but then things got worse. She began to experience sight problems and it got to the point that her employers felt it was unsafe for her to continue working as she really was not able to see well enough to continue. So, she lost her jobs. She applied for Employment and Support Allowance and was refused.

This is where we can back on the scene. We appealed this decision but the length of time between registering an appeal and getting a hearing or even an ATOS interview with a medical professional can be considerable and during that period, her housing benefit was stopped and as an

EEA migrant worker who had to prove that she was habitually resident in the UK and establish that she had the right to reside – she was really stuck. She was without assistance to cover her housing costs and at risk of eviction. Luckily, she was housed with a housing provider with whom we have an arrangement and they agreed to keep her housed while we sorted this out and they also gave her a modest sum each week to allow her to buy food – otherwise she would have been in food poverty. As it was, she was just cooking rice as it was relatively cheap and filling.

It took six months to negotiate the benefits system proving that she had worked for a considerable time in the UK before suffering the setbacks with her health and providing proof of her employment including details of all her employers in the UK, all her payslips, going to a DWP medical interview where the assessing doctor agreed that she was not able to work at this time, supplying medical evidence including an assessment from a Visual Impairment Team that she is severely sight impaired and completing numerous questionnaires and forms. She has now been awarded the benefit which will allow her time for the Visual Impairment Team to work with her to enable her to manage her disability and with help be able to do some work in the future. Her benefit is considerably less than what she earned when she was working and her aim was to be able to help support her children who live in Spain and the Dominican Republic by being able to contribute to their education costs. I defy anyone to say that this woman has come to the UK to exploit our benefits system. She has sadly been a victim of circumstances.

Last but not least, the mysterious case of the Chancellor's missing cat

As it was reported on the TV news, I am sure that many of you will be familiar with the adventures of Freya, George Osborne's cat. She was found and returned by a homeless outreach worker having made her way to Vauxhall. There was a charming article in The Guardian by the worker who found her and what struck me was the feline canniness which Freya displayed.

As you may know we have a cat living at our centre named Missy. Over time she has developed a network of "safe houses" in the immediate area where she can be guaranteed warmth, shelter, copious amounts of attention and food. As such, she is always committed to getting out of the

centre and her sprints to the cat flap would do credit to Usain Bolt. Unlike Missy, Freya just wanted to get home.

She apparently sighted the outreach workers from the vantage point of a hoarding meowing for assistance. Once she spotted what looked like a friendly face, she leapt down, negotiated the fence by crawling under a fence and came straight up to the worker who took her home and reported finding her to 11 Downing Street. In our centre, sometimes people who need help are either too shy or embarrassed or don't know how to approach us and ask for help. Maybe they should take a leaf out of Freya's book. We might not be able to run to a chauffeured limousine back to Downing Street but we might be able to help with that bus pass needed to get to that vital appointment or job interview!



Poetry Corner

The Bright Field

R. S. Thomas 1913-2000

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl of
great price, the one field that had the
treasure in it. I realize now that I must give
all that I have to possess it. Life is not
hurrying on to a receding future, nor
hankering after an imagined past. It is the
turning aside like Moses to the Miracle of
the lit bush, to a brightness that seemed as
transitory as your youth once, but is the
eternity that awaits you.*

Homelessness and Mental Health: a view from 'the front line'

By

Ellen Burns

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



It would be false to say that mental health issues play a role in all, or even most, of the housing problems of the clients we see in the advice service. However, there is a widely acknowledged link between the two issues. I thought I would write about my experience of the interaction between homelessness and mental health, as someone who is not a mental health professional but who encounters these issues regularly, on the 'front line' of a homelessness service.

Personality Disorders

I think it is fair to say that in homelessness centres, where most of the people present are going through a crisis point in their lives, we see a proportion of people with personality disorders that is much higher than that in the general population. Personality disorders cause/are long-term patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour that cause problems for the individual, and for those around them.

Some personality disorders cause paranoid, mistrustful thoughts and behaviour, which can have the result of socially isolating the individual and making them unwilling/unable to utilise help available. Other disorders cause chaotic, unstable, extreme thoughts, feelings and behaviour, which may again cause relationship breakdowns and isolate the person from friends and family who might have been able to help them. There are links between personality disorders and self-harming behaviour such as addictions and criminal behaviour.

The concept of a personality 'disorder' is a controversial one, but there certainly seem to be personality *types* or, at least, personality *traits* that cause regular problems in people's lives. These people are often difficult for us to deal with, and successfully help, in the Housing and Welfare Advice Office. For example, I sometimes see clients who genuinely believe that there is a conspiracy or personal vendetta against them by benefits or housing professionals or employers, where that doesn't seem to me to be the case. These people

might end up for prolonged periods in distressing situations, such as sleeping rough, but it is difficult to help them, though you desperately want to, until some of these beliefs and approaches change.

Psychotic Illnesses

When someone going through a severe psychotic breakdown turns up at the Manna, they sometimes use the Advice Service heavily. This can be because they don't perceive their homelessness as being related to a mental health problem, and think that we will be able to resolve it if they just state their case to us. For example, we recently had an apparently mentally unwell lady arrive, who has no immigration status in the UK, and thus no entitlement to work or claim benefits here (and thus no way of paying for housing). She came every day to the Advice Office and re-stated her case, stressing that she needed housing immediately, and could not understand why people were denying this to her.

It can be very tricky to help homeless people who seem to have a severe mental illness such as Schizophrenia or Bipolar Disorder, even if, unlike the lady above, they are entitled to benefits in the UK. This is for several reasons.

1. There are only a limited selection of housing providers who will accept clients with a mental illness, and can provide them with the necessary support to maintain their tenancies.
2. These housing providers all require a detailed risk assessment and clear information about diagnosis and treatment, as part of the referral. Sometimes the client has no diagnosis, as this is their first episode of illness. If they do have a diagnosis, by the time they come to us, in crisis, they have often stopped taking medication, and have lost touch with medical professionals. They may well be unwilling/unable to provide realistic information about their illness and the risks associated with it.
3. As with the (lovely, intelligent) lady described above, it can be very difficult to get someone who is in the grip of a mental health crisis to understand the reality of their housing situation, and the (lack of) options available to them.
4. As in her case, it also often doesn't take much for paranoia to kick in. When the situation was not resolved as simply and easily as, in her mind, it should be, she started to mistrust us and our motives. She refused to sign consent forms and insisted on seeing her database record.

5. Referrals to the local homeless person's mental health team are not easy as the client will usually not want a referral, and even when a referral is made they are often living a chaotic life and it is hard to pin them down to time and place for interview and assessment.

The Manna and Mental Health

Myself and my Advice Colleagues Karolina and Margaret continue to talk with, and try to emotionally and practically support, our mentally unwell clients. We continue to try to edge them towards services that can help them, we continue to try to help them grasp the realities of their situation and the quickest path out of it. We also talk with and support each other in this difficult, and sometimes frustrating and deeply worrying task.

We go on training courses in mental health issues, and mental health 'first aid'. We keep in close contact with the homelessness mental health team – START – who hold fortnightly meetings at the Manna, which Karolina attends.

If we are successful in getting someone who suffers from a mental illness appropriately housed, with a key worker and support plan, we provide tenancy support which has no time limit and often lasts for many years. There are some such clients who use the Manna daily, for the routine, structure and social contact which helps them manage their illness. The Project Workers know them well, and keep an eye out for signs of deterioration, distress, or imminent crisis.

Working with people with mental health problems in no way makes up the main of what we do at the Manna, but it is an interesting and challenging aspect of our work at times. I thought I would spend some time reflecting on, and putting into words, the complexity and sensitivity of the issues in play.

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Registered Charity No: 294691

NOTE FOR YOUR DIARY

The Manna Society's Annual General Meeting

Will be held at 7.00pm

On Wednesday 24th September

At 6 Melior Street, SE1 3QP

(Probably for the last time
at this address)

PLEASE COME & JOIN US

**Happy
Summer**

