

The Times they are a-changin'

By
Paddy Boyle
Manna Centre Administrator



The Eagle eyed amongst our readers will have noticed that my title changed. From 1st March Bandi has become our new Director and I have become the Administrator (part time). Bandi will be in overall charge of the centre and I will be responsible for the administration and fundraising.

The change has come about as I have decided to split my time between the centre (Monday to Wednesday) and another charity, African Mission. I would like to do what I can to make African Mission as established a charity as the Manna Society now is.

Both charities have similarities; both are working with the poor, one here in London and the other in Africa, in Uganda and Zimbabwe. Also both charities were started by Nannette Ffrench and Nannette is a Trustee of both.

With God's help and the support of compassionate people hopefully we will be able to benefit the lives of the poor both here and in Africa.

More information about African mission can be found at www.africanmission.org.uk.

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Short Stories of the Absurd

By
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Identity document – symbol of luxury

From the 19th February the Polish Consulate has decided not to issue any more one year temporary Polish passports. Up until the 19th the Polish Consulate used to support homeless people by issuing temporary passports without a consular fee. Each case had to be looked through very carefully by the General Polish Consul. In spite of the occasional refusal, these temporary passports were invaluable in helping those who found themselves homeless get off the streets.

Of course, any Polish national can get a 10 year passport here in the UK without the necessity of travelling to Poland. However it costs £89 in consular fees and an ID card must also be provided. It means that if a Polish national finds him/herself homeless and they do not have a passport or an ID card then they must travel to Poland and stay there at least 6 weeks in order to obtain an ID card and then a passport. The problem is that many homeless people do not have any close relatives in Poland or they are not in touch with their families and so have nowhere to go should they return home. They want to stay in the UK in the hope that they can find employment. Without valid identity documents this is practically impossible. It is a vicious circle.

The Polish Consulate is in the process of arranging a meeting with agencies working with homeless people here in London. I hope that some positive news about passport related issues and positive proposals which will benefit homeless Polish nationals will come from this meeting.

Homelessness in the winter & cold bureaucracy

Winter in the UK is a very hard time for those with no recourse to public fund and without a home, especially when the temperature falls below zero. There are a few winter shelters in London open from November until the end of March. When temperature falls to zero or below on three or more consecutive nights, additional Severe Weather Emergency Provision (SWEP) shelters open. However, there are times when it is on or below freezing for just one or two nights.

SWEP shelters offer 50-80 spaces at the most. Referral procedures were clear and 'friendly' during the 2008/2009 winter, even for day centre

advice worker. Unfortunately, it has changed since then. Now the procedure seems to be a top secret, it is only easy accessible for Outreach Teams. No one who has not been seen, registered and then referred to SWEP by an Outreach Team can get the privilege of obtaining a space there. Is it possible for Outreach Teams to find every rough sleeper in London? Surely not.

John was a rough sleeper who did not want to spend another freezing night around London Bridge so he decided to join his friend who had already been referred to a SWEP shelter. They both turned up at the shelter in the late evening. Despite it being extremely cold, John who was older than his friend was not allowed in. Formal referral documents had not been completed for him before he arrived; bureaucratic criteria had not been met, therefore he would have to fend for himself on the streets in temperatures that were life threatening.

Warsaw, the capital of Poland, has many additional winter shelters, when the temperature falls down below zero. Two huge temporary shelters offering 1,000 beds operate. Any homeless person of any nationality is welcomed, no matter if they are in receipt of Social Security benefits or not and regardless if they have been referred or not. The only fact that matters is that they are homeless and in need of a bed. Despite Poland being a much poorer country than the UK if someone arrives at a cold weather shelter it is obvious that they are in need and they would be given a bed for the night.

Benefits policy – yes means NO

One of our clients became homeless because he lost his job. Robert had been working in the UK for about 4 years before he became jobless and consequently homeless. He applied for Jobseeker Allowance (JSA) but following some unfortunate circumstances, the Jobcentre decided Robert was not entitled to JSA. The Jobcentre provided Robert with its decision informing him that he had not provided them with the information they had requested from him.

This came as a surprise as he had not actually received any letter from the Jobcentre requesting further information. After he conducted a little investigation it transpired that the Jobcentre worker responsible for addressing the envelope sent to Robert had mistaken his surname. Any post sent to the Manna's address with an unregistered name on it (no one is authorised to receive post here unless they are registered on our client database and have signed a 6 months correspondence agreement) is

simply returned to the sender. This is what has happened to the letter sent to Robert.

The Jobcentre did not take any responsibility for the error. Robert with the support of a lawyer sued them over their negligence and won his case. Despite all of the outstanding payments being paid into his bank account, the Jobcentre closed his claim and informed him he would have to make a new claim. A new claim would entail additional paperwork and weeks of waiting for a decision to be made. Another court hearing took place and things have now been sorted. The Court found in Robert's favour ruling that the Jobcentre had acted unlawfully when it closed his claim.

The Right to reside & the Habitual Residency Test.

Any A8 National may apply for an EEA1 Certificate (commonly called a 'temporary residency' certificate): "A registration certificate is a document, issued to EEA or Swiss nationals, that confirms their right of residence under European law". European Economic Area nationals who are not British citizens are entitled to benefits in the UK only after 12 months of legal employment in this country. However, even if a claimant meets this requirement they also must pass the Habitual Residency Test (HRT) and very often this becomes the reason why they are refused benefit.

Completing the Habitual Residency Test form does not take much time and requires answering simple questions: when did you come to live in the UK, have you registered with a GP etc. Its main task is to verify if the person applying for benefits has the right to reside here as well as being habitually resident in the UK. But there are no clear rules about passing the test. The Jobcentre's website only informs you that "if the test is not satisfied you will not be entitled to benefit". One of Manna's clients was refused Jobseeker Allowance on not passing the Habitual Residence Test. What is strange and ridiculous about this situation is that the same client had successfully applied for an EEA1 Certificate one year before...



From homelessness into employment

By
Margaret Shapland

Welfare & Advice Worker



“Our research shows that many homeless people are highly motivated to work, with financial rewards from work rarely being the primary motivation. But the route from homelessness into sustainable employment is often extremely complex and non-linear.” – Making Work Work – Business Action on Homelessness (BAOH)

January 2009

Business Action in the Community is a partnership between business, homeless agencies and the Government whose 13 week “Ready to Work” programme has successfully moved 1,200 out of 3,300 homeless people into employment since 2003.

This particular report looked at the issues that previously homeless individuals face when crossing the threshold from unemployment into the workplace. As you know, there are countless initiatives aimed at getting unemployed individuals back into the workplace but as the report points out that much less emphasis is placed on the critical few months to sustain people as they make that transition.

There were a number of major findings:

Most homeless people are extremely motivated to work **but** a number of issues and factors can hinder that transition from being homeless, resettled and going back to work. BAOH found that:

Fears of debt and further homelessness act as a barrier to employment

Previous bad experiences of employment or debt due to problems with benefits can stop people from taking steps back into employment. In the centre, we have had direct experience of clients who have tried to go back to work, found themselves in rent arrears, have to leave the property either voluntarily or through eviction.

They may find themselves classed as intentionally homeless, with subsequent difficulties in getting re-housed both in the social or private rented sector as the history of arrears (even if people have tried extremely hard to try and meet their obligations with respect to rent) follow them.

The benefits system seems to hinder more than help

There are two findings that the report focuses on

a) fear of benefit sanctions means many clients minimise their level of contact with job centres relying more on hostel workers but that among those staff, there can be widespread misconceptions about benefit entitlement – one of the advantages that we, as a centre have, is that not only are the advice staff trained in this area but we are lucky enough to have a benefits adviser from the Department of Work and Pensions provide a session at the centre

b) There is low awareness of in-work benefits among clients. I know from personal experience that when I returned to work after a period of illness at fifty years of age, there was no exit interview or advice given by the Jobcentre staff to tell me that I was entitled to 4 weeks coverage of Housing and Council Tax Benefit or that I might be entitled to Working Tax Credits, which leads me on to the third factor

c) Issues relating to benefit transition. Most clients do not have a cushion of savings to help through the transition from benefits to work Making sure that benefit transitions are handled accurately and in a timely manner is critical but much of client experience illustrates that it does not and the length of time that clients in low-paid work or part-time work (where they are entitled to a contribution from Housing benefit to their rent payments) generates considerable stress for clients and makes them vulnerable to falling back into homelessness

“It is when you start work is when they mess it all up because they want all your wage slips and how much you are earning and then you have to wait and when they finally work it out and it is all wrong, so it goes back again...and then the rent people are waiting ...so, it all gets messed up again” - Making Work Work - BAOH

One of our client’s Housing Benefit claim was taking 6-8 weeks to process as his earnings were from a part-time job and entitled him to a Housing Benefit “top-up” and was suspended while awaiting confirmation from the DWP that the client had, in fact, signed off as he now had work. In addition, the sensitivity of the Housing Benefit system to changes in circumstances can also make it difficult for people in short-term contracts or with fluctuating hours as there is a constant need for re-calculation of any benefit they may be entitled to

“When you get employment, you spend so much time running from one to the other, between jobcentre and the council – one jobcentre tells you the council will do this, then you go to the council (because it is your responsibility to tell them of any

changes in circumstances) and they will tell you that they don't do that. It is very, very frustrating... takes the incentive of getting a job away." Making Work Work - BAOH

Work does not always pay....?

The BAOH report concluded that some people are not better off in work or very marginally so, especially when the loss of passported benefits such as prescriptions and employment related costs such as travel are factored in. This is particularly acute for people who are single, young (under 25) and working part-time but more than 16 hours per week. We had a client who experienced such a problem – he is a young man who had mild learning disabilities and who worked hard to get himself a job – when we did a budget sheet and an in-work calculation, his financial position was scarcely better than it had been on benefits but he had to pay full Council Tax and all of his rent. The steps for Housing Benefit are not graduated but stepped, so some clients can be very unlucky and just earn that little bit more that pushed them over the threshold. We suggested looking at Working Tax Credit as an option to boost his income but he was so exhausted and disillusioned, he did not want to pursue this option in the end, he gave up a perfectly fine local authority property and went to live with his uncle.

Hostel rents and conditions are not always conducive to employment

Recently, the Department of Communities and Local Government has made a commitment to making homeless hostels "Places of Change", which places an emphasis on hostels contributing more to moving their residents forward and that includes meaningful occupation, training and employment possibilities. That said, the conditions in hostels can mean that the environment is not conducive to people going back to the workplace

"I used to have a hard time to sleep in the hostel to be honest. When I do delivery I used to finish late in the night. I would come in at about 3 am after my shift and tried to sleep... they're all drunk, some people on Class A drugs... screaming, fighting and all this"

Making Work Work - BAOH

Over and above the environment, there is often considerable confusion over rent levels when residents get back into employment. In some cases, residents are charged the full cost of their rent – including support costs as well as housing costs – as an average hostel space cost in the order of £150 per week, this can be extremely onerous for many clients whose starting point earnings are low.

The first few months in work are make or break

The research reported that these first months can be critical if a client is to make the sustained transition into employment and out of homelessness and there are factors that can still make that transition fragile;

Poor financial planning

Often when we look at whether a job opportunity can yield sufficient income to cover outgoing costs, clients sometimes accept a position without taking into account the full impact of their outgoings. Better-off calculations can do some of this work but does not factor in the impact of temporary contracts nor any outstanding debts that the client may need to repay.

The effect of temporary or casual contracts

Clients returning to work often take part-time or temporary contracts and the benefits system is poorly equipped to deal with this. Coupled with the low level of awareness of benefit rules (which we come across all the time), there are the natural fears that clients have about what will happen if a job does not work out or a temporary contract come to an end. They become "risk averse" and choose not to go back to the workplace.

Fitting in at work

I once led a workshop for a major homelessness organisation on returning to work – they were looking to employ service users in their own organisation as well as preparing them better for a return to the workplace and we used a visualisation exercise to build a list of the likely problems that they might face. Large among them was the change from the less structured environment of unemployment and hostel living, feelings that they might be "looked down upon", lack of self-confidence and self-belief and for some who had been unemployed for some time, that the workplace was a distinctly alien environment

Social isolation and lack of social networks once in work

Many of the respondents to the BAOH research reported feeling lonely and isolated once they returned to the workplace and the stresses of returning can re-ignite pre-existing mental health issues that make people less resilient and able to deal with some of the challenges and problems they may come across in the workplace. Often, if people have moved from a hostel and spent some time in homeless environments and more often than not lost contact with their family, their circle of acquaintances may be built entirely from those that they have met on the homeless circuit. Like all

change, it takes time and considerable bravery to create what is almost an entirely “new” life without a bedrock of existing social contacts to ease that transition.

What this report really wants us to take away from it is best summed up in the following quote,

“There’s load of money being spent getting people into work and there is nothing being spent getting them over the threshold... it’s like a bride getting married and you can imagine all the effort that goes into a wedding but when she works up the aisle and there is no husband there... well then, all the money and effort has not been worth it”

Making Work Work - BAOH

What we should take away is the need to lobby and campaign so that that very delicate transitional period is considered and that those bodies involved with such a transition are geared up and able to make sure that more people who deserve another chance in the workplace are supported to make a success of it.



TB Screening at the Manna Centre



On Tuesday 23rd February the mobile X-Ray Unit above visited the centre.

- 57 people were screened
- 55 men
- 2 women
- 1 of those screened was referred for further treatment

The Creative Potential Of the Dead End

*I have come up against myself
a wall –
a blank –
nowhere to go –
unsure, lost –
bewildered.*

*Creativity is released
in any death situation,
when we believe in life,
when we are people in hope.*

*For people of hope
there is never any real death
for death has been conquered by Christ
and life has been exchanged for it.*

*I have faced death often
in many different ways
and everything has seemed so hopeless life-less.*

*At the moment of death I am called
to a faith response
that defies reason.*

*If only we had even a scrap
of resurrection faith,
there would be an abundance
of life and hope.*

*We turn away too often
in despair
in hopelessness
in tiredness
in anger
in self pity
in defeat.*

*We turn away from the Dead-End
the tomb,
because we are blind.
We fail to see the light
waiting to be called forth
to resurrection.*

*Jesus saw his dead-end coming.
Everything he worked and preached for
was crumbling around him.*

*The whole thing
was in shambles;
his followers scared and confused,
but he never turned back
even when he got to the dead-end –
he walked right into it in faith,
and he destroyed death
and dead-ends.*

Edwina Gateley
From ‘I hear a seed growing’

My journey with the Manna

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



I can vividly remember the very first time I met Nannette Ffrench, our Founder, it was at my recruitment interview to be the Campaigns Worker for the Manna Society. She did not say much during the interview, leaving it to the other two people on the panel to bombard me with questions, she listening intently to my answers. At the very end, I felt as if she had made up her mind about me. I felt accepted, but I could not quite tell, because nothing had been said about any job offer.

Later on the same day, I would learn that I was indeed offered the job. Nine years have passed since then and as I take over as Director, I cannot help but think about my journey with the Manna Society. First as the Campaigns Worker, then two years later combining this role with providing advice to our service users. My latter role consisted of helping homeless people find accommodation, dealing with their welfare benefits, and many other issues such as mental health problems and alcohol and drug dependencies.

I learnt first-hand about our vision from Nannette, telling me stories, only as she could tell them in her low gentle voice; telling me about their first steps, she and her comrades, took to help homeless people in London. “You see it was the service-users themselves that found a way to feed themselves, telling me one day to go to our local bakery to collect bread that has been left over, as we did not have enough money to buy our own bread.” This would later inspire her to call the centre after the Manna, in reminiscence of the children of Israel who depended on God’s providence for food.

As practical advice on campaigning, she would say “always tell stories; tell people what you witness here at the Manna Centre”. Statistics are important for measuring the scale of a problem and for planning, but what’s a statistic without a story, without a face. Similarly London’s ‘Evening Standard’ recently had a campaign highlighting poverty and the poor living in London. In order to make the statistics real they picked out a few people and families to highlight

the story of thousands of others affected by poverty.

Nannette coached me, encouraging me to trust my instincts. I would ask her, “what should I do?” She would answer me with another question, “what do you think we should do?” She wanted my contribution as much as I wanted hers to shape our campaigns. Her approach, as far as I can tell, is to live love and show love, to respect and accept people and ourselves and in doing so, we can all find a way out of our problems, whatever they may be.

Such idealism would have remained empty words if not implemented in a practical way, as we engage those using the services we offer. And for me, no-one has helped me understand it better, in a practical and pragmatic way than my predecessor, Paddy Boyle. He has broken down this great vision of love and acceptance in a way that makes sense. “We’ve got to be responsible with the money we’re entrusted with... think of the pensioner who gives us £5 a month, it is not that they have too much to get by on themselves...”, he would often say to me. He has always gone the extra-mile to see through problems faced by service users and has been a challenge to all of us to offer an ever efficient service that people can rely on as they struggle with what is keeping them homeless. It is hard to imagine how the Manna Centre could have been so reliable and effective without him at the helm.

Last but by no way least, we could not have offered this service over these last 28 years without the generosity of our supporters, their unfailing commitment to those experiencing homelessness and poverty. As I take over as Director, Nannette’s and Paddy’s examples and counsels received over the years will stand me in good stead and I hope will help me navigate through the many challenges we still face. For you our supporters, indeed our sponsors, we are ever indebted to you for making it possible for the 200 people or so who visit the Manna Centre to receive a quality service, be it for a good cooked meal, a shower, a change of clothes and a chance to be accommodated and start a new life through our advice service. Friends, happy Easter!



