

*The Manna Society Newsletter*  
*Summer 2015*



## Equality is the soul of liberty

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



*“Equality is the soul of liberty; there is, in fact, no liberty without it” – Frances Wright (American Social Reformer)*

Frances Wright wrote this in a time of great inequality in the USA when slavery was still an institution and in fact she died the year that slavery was abolished. Can we truly say that the principle she expresses is as alive as we all hope today even in a liberal country such as ours?

### Equality – What equality?

I ponder on her words and wonder how truly equal our society is. As ever I have been trawling through recent writings on homelessness and I think you would be shocked.

Let’s start by looking at the introduction of **Public Spaces Protection Orders**. This allows local authorities (Hackney being one) to ban or regulate any activity in defined public spaces that they believe “is likely to have a detrimental effect on the quality of life of those in the locality”. Anyone falling foul of such an order can face a £100 on-the-spot penalty or a fine of up to £1,000, and a criminal record. To many homeless organisations, it is deeply concerning that rough sleeping should be included as an antisocial activity and criminalised when many who are rough sleeping are among the most vulnerable members of society.

In Oxford, local campaigners persuaded Oxford city council not to include rough sleepers in a similar measure. This followed a petition signed by more than 72,000 people who agreed that such a move would risk “treating rough sleepers as a problem to be dealt with rather than as individual human beings”.

### The use of “defensive architecture”

By this we mean, the anti-homeless metal spikes appearing in doorways and the benches designed to prevent people lying down on them. These measures treat homeless people as a nuisance when many have just experienced issues that we can all sympathise with – relationship breakdowns,

domestic abuse, have lost a home due to a bereavement, come as refugees... We meet them all the time and I can tell you that the task of finding housing for them is such these days that you are not in a position to offer an “on-the-day” solution on many occasions where you pack them off to a hostel, shared housing or a private rented solution so it is not really their fault. Even Boris Johnson called anti-homeless metal spikes - ‘ugly, self-defeating and stupid’.

### Banning homeless people from using public libraries

Homeless people in Manchester have been banned from entering the city’s main public library or using the library toilets after they set up a protest camp outside. The protest was against the austerity measures that have impacted on benefits and to highlight homelessness in the city, with demonstrators urging council bosses to do more to tackle the problem. After being refused access to the library, one of the protesters told media that “*I want equal rights. I want to be able to use the library just like everyone else,*” The lady in question was a trained joiner had been evicted from her council flat after becoming disabled with lumbar degenerative disc disease and having her benefits sanctioned. She had been homeless for seven months. Now, the local authority has said that access was denied to the group as there had been an attempt to occupy the library. One member of the public was initially refused entry as he had been seen talking to the group and it required intervention from a more senior official at the site for him to gain entry.

We are lucky in that we have a very good local library which is an enormous boon to our client as they can search for work on the computers, look through papers etc. and obviously providing that they are being there in accordance with the library rules, they experience no problems so it is sad to see that other authorities have not taken this approach.

### Wrong assessment of need for street homeless at local authorities

Following a Supreme Court judgment, housing officers will be required to adopt a new approach. The ruling found that many local authorities have wrongly been assessing need in relation to those deemed “street homeless” – even though the

description does not appear in the relevant legislation.

The case centred on a homeless man who had multiple physical problems and psychotic symptoms and should not have been turned away by the local authority in London. In the judgement, the Supreme Court judges observed in their judgement.

*“He was deemed by the local authority not to be in priority need because he would not be at a greater risk of injury or detriment than an ordinary street homeless person, due to the ability of his wife and son to fend for the whole household. “*

*“The expression ‘street homeless’, is ... much used, but it is not to be found in the 1996 Housing Act,” the judgment added. “The expression can plainly mean somewhat different things to different people. “‘Homeless’, as defined in the act, is an adjective which can cover a number of different situations, and the very fact that the statute does not distinguish between them calls into question the legitimacy of doing so when considering the nature or extent of an authority’s duty to an applicant.”*

From personal experience of presenting clients to local authorities, the test for vulnerability which is referred to in the initial quote had become such a high hurdle that vulnerable people are at risk of being turned away. This new ruling provides a clearer set of rules by which local authority housing officers will now have to give due weight in their investigations as it asks that vulnerability is assessed against comparison to the situation of an ordinary person. Information from Crisis backs this up.

Crisis recently carried out a mystery shopping exercise in which 8 formerly homeless people visited 16 local authorities to examine the quality of advice and assistance they provide to single homeless people. In well over half (50) of the 87 visits, the help offered was inadequate. In 29 cases, they were simply turned away without any help or the opportunity to speak to a housing advisor. This was despite the mystery shoppers portraying characters in very vulnerable situations: someone who forced to sleep rough after losing their job, a young person thrown out of the family home, a

victim of domestic violence and a person with learning difficulties.

### **The basic facts of homelessness**

We know that homelessness brings with it a raft of disadvantages already

- Homelessness is an isolating and deskilling experience. Many homeless people have no formal qualifications at all. Only 2% of homeless people are in full-time employment but we know that the overwhelming majority want to work.
- Homeless people experience very poor health outcomes, both physical and mental. Up to 80% of homeless people have mental health problems and the average age of death for a homeless person is just 47.
- Homeless people are 13 times more likely to be a victim of violence – much of it perpetrated by the general public
- Homelessness can be particularly dangerous for women. 28% have formed an unwanted sexual partnership and 20% have engaged in sex work to get a roof over their heads

With all the above issues being part of the mix, do we as a society really want to add to homeless peoples woes by making it harder for them to be able to live until they get the help they need and can we really be judged to hold true to the principle of equality if we believe it is right to treat people in this way.



### **WEEKDAY KITCHEN VOLUNTEERS NEEDED**

**Although life in our new kitchen is quieter than our old one, we still need volunteers to help with the dishes. There are quiet periods with only the hour from 11.30 to 12.30 when it is constantly busy.**

**If you are interested and are free on a WEEKDAY (10am – 2pm) and would like to help out in the kitchen please ring Paddy on 020 7357 9363.**

**Many thanks.**

## Nothing is set in stone

By

**Karolina Muszynska**

**Housing & Welfare Advice Worker**



I joined The Manna Society around 5 years ago. During one of my introductory days I had a conversation with my manager about how the advice service works. I remember him explaining to me the main rules and policies and finally concluding "At the Manna nothing is set in stones". He meant that although we do have rules and policies that should be respected, we are given the flexibility to make our own exceptions to the rules. We will do it only if we strongly feel it will benefit our client. This is because everyone deserves help, even if they do not fit into rules and categories. This is because we are human beings and we are all different. This is because our purpose in the first place is to offer help and if rules do not serve that purpose, an exception has to be made.

'Nothing is set in stones' became my guiding mantra through my work in the Manna and I feel very grateful to work for an organisation, which recognises 'the need for exceptions'. We do exceptions very rarely and they have to be well considered and judged. Please do not get me wrong - I am not against the rules. Rules are very important - they set the boundaries and create a clear situation for all participants. We need laws and policies but we also need to remember that they were created to help us, to serve us and not the other way round. Let me give you few examples of how it works in the Manna.

Our advice service is offered on a first come first serve, drop-in basis. Due to funding requirements we can only book priority appointments for clients referred to us by the London Borough of Southwark. Apart from these referrals most of our clients, who wish to access the advice service, have to get up very early and be at our doors at around 7:30am. This is the rule.

Amy has been using the Manna Day Centre for over 6 years. She has gone through a lot. We met her, when she was living in a squat with her partner and their two kids. Sadly, the father of her kids has passed away and she is was on her own, with her two toddlers and no income. Amy has since married and has another child with her new

husband. Although she now lives in social housing in Ealing she still has difficulties with which she needs help. Due to the fact that she now lives a long way from the Manna and has child care responsibilities it would be very difficult for her to access our housing advice service, if we did not make an exception from the normal rule and book an appointment for her when she needs to be seen.

Another example: on Mondays and Wednesdays we run a second-hand clothing store for our service users. This service is very popular, especially in the winter time. Again to get some clothing, one needs to come in the morning and put his/her name on the list (drop-in, first come first serve). We do not generally give clothing outside of these days but at times we would.

Adam is a young (21 years old) and Polish. He came to live in UK 7 months ago. He worked as a full time kitchen assistant until he lost his job 4 weeks ago. He did not know that he can claim housing benefit while unemployed to help him to pay for his rent. As a result he left his accommodation as could not pay for it and he ended up living on the streets. Luckily the local outreach team signposted him to us. When he came for the first time he looked really rough. He had no idea about homeless services so did not have a shower and a shave for week. All his clothes were very dirty. We made an exceptions and gave him new clothes as he was really in need of these.

I really love this flexibility in the Manna Day Centre. I do wish that more companies, organisation and services could be more flexible in how they offer their services. Life would me so much easier and more pleasant for all concerned. I must admit that I sometimes lose my temper when I am trying to help someone and I am confronted with very the rigidness of various institutions.

A few weeks ago I had been assisting Mark to get his post office card replaced. Mark had lost it and was unable to access his social security benefit money which is paid directly into his post office account. To order a replacement card one needs to call their helpline and answer a number of security questions. We did so twice but unfortunately Mark was unable to answer the security questions correctly.

Mark suffers from a personality disorder that affects the way he thinks, feels, perceives and relate to others. His behaviour can be very challenging at times and he can become easily agitated. I could see that he was struggling to answer the security questions and he was becoming anxious and nervous. I spoke to the person Mark had been speaking to and asked if they could send his replacement card to his local post office branch. He could then bring his ID and verify his identity this way.

The Post Office advisor told me that although post office cards are always collected at local post office branches he would be unable to order one for us as Mark had not passed the security procedure. My request was refused because the helpline advisor was following his organisation's rules rigidly. Fair enough. On the other hand we did not want them to release any personal information about our client over the phone and I felt that our client's identity would be verified once he went to collect his card.

If post office advisors had a bit more flexibility maybe we could have sorted out this issue quicker and Mark would not have to wait time to gain access to his money. As it was we have had to put our request in writing. This I did two weeks ago and we are still waiting to hear back from the post office.

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## Settling in

By

**Bandi Mbubi**

**Manna Centre Director**



We finally moved to our new building on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2015, after several changes to the date of the move. As expected, we've experienced teething problems. The first one was when we noticed that there was insufficient electricity supply to our new industrial washing machine. It meant that for about 3 weeks, we couldn't run the shower facilities as we had no means to clean used towels. This issue has since been resolved. However, the hot water in the showers is running out quickly, after about an hour of constant use, instead of four like in the old place. We're working with the developers to find a solution to this problem and we hope to resolve it soon. In addition, several times the drains were blocked causing our basement to be flooded. The developers have put in temporary measures to stop this problem from recurring and are working on a longer term solution. We have also added a protective boarding to make it easier to clean the walls since we've moved in.

Recently I have been thinking about the meaning of Pentecost and how it can still inspire us as modern day Christians, people of goodwill, working at the Manna or supporting it. What has impressed me the most about the story of Pentecost, as told in Acts 2, is not so much the tongues of fire resting on the disciples heads, or them speaking in tongues, but the empowering of the Holy Spirit enabling them to act boldly in the midst of change and uncertainty. A greater sense of mission in spite of the anxiety one feels when faced with change. By God's grace, we still have a building to cater for His people. Through the R.C. Archdiocese of Southwark who generously provided us with our new building free of charge, the wider Christian community and people of goodwill who support us both in kind and financially, God continues to show His providence.

Although five out of our seven services are functioning as usual, albeit the issues already raised, two are still to restart properly. At the moment we don't have a furniture store on site, unlike previously, which means that donated furniture isn't directly accessible. We're working

out the best way to pass on furniture to our service-users once it's been donated to us. The other service of training and education hasn't operated since we've moved in. The reason for the delay is twofold. One, the room we are going to use was not ready when we moved buildings. Two, it has taken out IT guys longer than we anticipated to prepare the new laptops to be ready for use.

Although phase one of our move is now complete and 70% (approximately) of our building will stay as it is now there is still a second phase to be completed. Once completed, it will mean that some offices of the offices and the clothing store now on the first floor will move down to the ground floor. It should take about 12 months for this phase to be completed.

Something to look for in our future communications is the official opening of our new premises. We intend to have a blessing officiated by the local clergy. We hope to time it so that it coincides with our AGM.

May the Spirit of Pentecost embolden us all to do what we're called for faithfully, knowing full well that God always provides when He calls us!



*Come O Holy Spirit  
fill the hearts of thy faithful  
and  
enkindle in them  
the fire of your love*

## The role of the state

By

**Jonathan Scott**

**Housing & Welfare Advice Worker**



*“The state is not abolished, it withers away” -  
Friedrich Engels*

Before getting down to the business of my article, I would like to introduce myself I am the new advice worker who has replaced Ellen. I have worked in the charitable sector for over five years primarily with organisations that assisted migrants and Refugees where I have experience of dealing with the issue of homelessness.

Why start with a quote from the forefather of Communism, which would appear to have no relevance to contemporary free market liberal democracy that is the UK? The new Conservative Government tends to enact a further £12 billion of welfare cuts. However, regardless of the Government in power, the general direction of Government policy in terms of welfare and social policy will not change markedly.

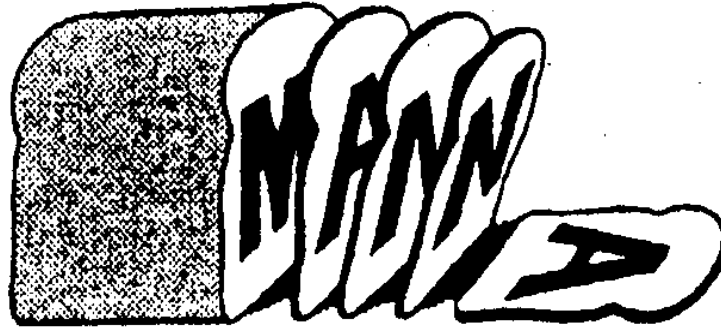
Since the 1980s the state has incrementally decreased its role in trying to find a solution to the problems faced by society. Engels’ quote is taken from a situation of what is now viewed as “utopian nonsense”, where Engels’ sees the state and capitalism as the cause of social problems and their removal would enable an end of poverty, squalor, ignorance and want. However although the state has not “withered away”, its previous role and functions seem to be in the process of doing this, or at least the state no longer carries out these functions to the extent that it has in the past but uses other agencies to implement some of these functions.

Since the eighties and now in the age of austerity, Government intervention to solve social and economic problems was seen by some to exacerbate many of the social problems facing society. Such a view is now the prevailing orthodoxy in both main political parties. However this is a failure to acknowledge in many ways that prior to the 1980s, Government involvement was seen to help create a more equal and fairer United Kingdom, even if its’ actions did not meet that objective.

How does this fit in with my job and the issue of homelessness? I would say the Government services involved in the housing sector do not see their responsibility to truly tackle homelessness, although they might disagree with this! It seems as if the role of the Local Authority’s Homeless persons Unit is reduced to simply managing supply and to rationing support. Likewise Social Services, Mental Health Services, and Immigration departments are moving away from tackling social problems directly to contracting out the problem to another service or organisation as part of their project managing role.

Unfortunately, this in my opinion, not always down to austerity, it is part of a deeper failing within society. We have come to accept that as a society individuals are entitled to pursue their own personal interests, regardless of the effect or possible detriment this may have on others. We as a society justify this by representing those who are in such negative predicaments as being responsible for their own situations. After all it is a lot easier to rationalise doing nothing if their failure is portrayed as stemming from their character rather the situation they are in. This is nothing new I guess and I would be naive for thinking so, but it is a lot easier to shrug your shoulders and accept the status-quo.





As we have used the bulk of our Harvest Festival donations from last year there are now quite a number of things we need to see us through to this year's Harvest.

We are in need of the following:

**FOOD:**

- Tinned Tomatoes
  - Sugar
- Diluted soft drinks
- Jars of spaghetti & curry sauces
  - Hot dogs
- Tins of corned beef & ham
  - Cooking oil
  - Salt

**CLOTHING:**

- Men's trousers
  - Socks

**TOILETRIES**

- Bars of soap
- Shaving foam
- Disposable razors