

The Manna Society Newsletter

Summer 2017



Working with homeless people & those in need

Manna Society AGM invitation

Please come along to our Annual General Meeting

On

Wednesday 20th September at 7.00pm

At

The Manna Centre, 12 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP

Housing First
By
Karolina Muszynska
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



Dawn Foster in The Guardian on 21st March this year wrote *“A European housing body has warned that homelessness and exclusion from housing has reached crisis point in the majority of countries in the EU...The UK now ranks 20th out of 28 countries, with ‘a broken housing market’ out of reach for poor and middle-class people”*. The same article mentions Finland as the only European country where homelessness is continuing to decrease. How has Finland achieved this? In 2008 they decided to adopt a completely new way to tackle homelessness. I will explain this approach later but first I would like to highlight some of the shortcomings with the current situation.

Most of the people working in the field of homelessness would agree that homelessness has reached a crisis point. The housing situation, especially in London, is getting worse and worse. In fact many working people are struggling to pay their rent. A few of my single friends in their fifties despite working full time are forced to live in shared accommodation as self-contained flats are beyond their financial reach.

In our advice service we see more and more homeless clients who are working part time or on zero hour contracts. Interestingly this group is the most difficult for us to house. Low, fluctuating income causes a lot of hassle with housing benefit payments, therefore many landlords prefer tenants either with full housing benefit entitlement or with a full-time, regular income. Also, working people are generally excluded from receiving assistance from Budgeting Loans or Emergency Support payments, so it’s almost impossible to raise money for up-front costs like rent in advance or for a deposit.

People become homeless for a variety of reasons but there is one main reason why they remain homeless i.e. a lack of affordable housing.

In 2008 Finland adopted new approach to tackle homelessness called Housing First. Housing First was developed as a new way to approach homelessness in Los Angeles in the late 1980s. The idea is to provide permanent, stable, affordable housing to homeless people immediately instead of putting them through a system consisting of several stages of temporary and transitional accommodation. Housing First views housing as the foundation for life improvement. Its philosophy is based on the belief that people need basic necessities like food and a place to live before they can deal with less critical ones, such as getting a job, budgeting, addressing addictions issue etc. Therefore it focuses on providing affordable housing with additional support if needed. Of course you cannot offer homeless people homes that do not exist so it is a long term project, requiring effort and cooperation between authorities, local communities and non-governmental organisations. Housing first needs housing stock first. Finland addressed this by the use of social housing, buying flats from the private market, building blocks for supported housing and converting shelters and hostels into self-contained units.

I like the idea of Housing First – that a right to housing is a basic human right. Also, through the years of my work in the Manna I have observed some of the defects in the current system. There is a lot of people who have been homeless for 10 years or more. Rough sleeping, with short episodes of being in various types of accommodation. On and off. Despite the fact that they are well known to various homelessness organisations and that many workers have made a genuine effort to help them, they still find themselves in the same position over the course of a number of years. It is a very frustrating part of our work to see people getting

older on the streets. It's obvious that the current strategies are failing to work so it's time to try new approaches that have proven to work elsewhere. It should be an absolute priority for the new government to address the housing crisis by reviewing and reforming the current housing system.

Most needed items

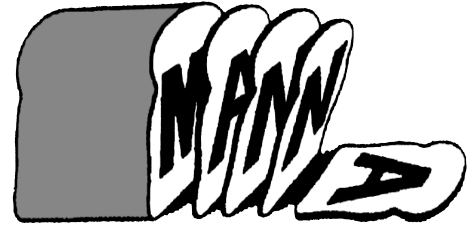
Summer (June to September) is the time of year when our foodstuffs are at their lowest levels.

We are in need of the following items to see us through until the Harvest Festival begins.

- Tins of fish
- Tinned meat
- Rice
- Corned beef
- Tinned ham
- Coffee
- Tinned tomatoes
- Tinned vegetables
- Sugar
- Powdered milk
- Dilutable soft drink:

Toiletries

- Shampoo



Manna Society Central Office

12 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP

Tel/Fax: 020 7357 9363

Website: www.mannasociety.org.uk

Email: mail@mannasociety.org.uk

Manna Day Centre

12 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP

Tel: 020 7403 1931

Email: daycentre@mannasociety.org.uk

Director

Bandi Mbubi

Tel: 020 7403 0441

Email: bandi@mannasociety.org.uk

Editor: Paddy Boyle

[facebook.com/TheMannaSociety](https://www.facebook.com/TheMannaSociety)

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Homelessness current impacts and going forward: a view from the experts

By

**Margaret Shapland
Housing and Welfare Advice Worker**



In March this year, the Homelessness Monitor for 2017 was published. It is a key document in outlining the realities and the challenges for those of us who work with homeless and vulnerable people. I think you would be interested in the key points this annual survey highlighted.

A continuing upward trend in rough sleeping

The first finding to point out is that rough sleeping has increased 132% since 2010. The statistics show that rough sleeping has doubled in London since 2010. It is appalling of course but within that statistic the findings were that there had been a recent sharp reduction in the numbers of Eastern European nationals who were rough sleeping – in line with our experience that Eastern European clients is reducing certainly in the advice service – the unsettled situation post- referendum and the fact that the reduction in the value of sterling which is making employment in the UK less attractive.

What has been happening is that there is now an increase in the number of UK nationals now rough sleeping which is rising – increasing by 6% in one quarter

Homelessness approaches to local authorities

Acceptance of “duty to house” has risen by 44% above those in 2009/10 and local authority case actions in homelessness have risen by 32%. That is slightly below what was expected and the evidence suggests that funding cuts in local authority homelessness services are limiting the service capacity in those departments. That means that organisations such as us are more likely to shoulder a greater level of burden. We are certainly aware of increases of referrals both direct and indirect from our local authority.

What areas of England are most affected?

Regionally the greatest pressures have been felt in the South-east which is no surprise and seems to be spreading outwards – West Midlands. The belief is that the extreme pressures felt in London in particular over recent years have started to transfer themselves to other areas.

Obviously, London and the South is our backyard and there is no doubt that a greater part of our work these days is trying to get people in the right place to be able to move into proper accommodation and then helping them get that accommodation and keep it.

Why are people finding themselves in this situation?

Fallout in the private rented sector

The greatest recorded increase in statutory homelessness in recent years is attributable to the sharply rising numbers made homeless from the private rented sector, which has almost quadrupled over the period. Acceptance of “duty to house” by local authorities has risen by 31% since 2010.

From our experience, this is mostly landlords exercising their legal right to ask people to leave at the end of any 6 month period under what is called a Section 21 action (essentially a no contest eviction) or have voluntarily given up accommodation as rents have increased beyond their means or have got into arrears due to falls in income or the highly variable nature of their income meaning that they can find themselves inadvertently in arrears.

Welfare cuts

It is estimated that the welfare cuts introduced over the last 10 years will reduce the incomes of poor households that are both **in and out of work** by around £25 billion by 2020/21.

This is against a background where existing welfare cuts, trends in the economy and higher costs for housing have already had a significant effect – particularly affecting members of working families.

Our experiences of working with clients who are in work is that they have to work a seven day week – given the caveat that they are offered the hours to so do - to achieve any level of reasonable salary that makes them both an attractive and stable prospect for private renting. At that point too, they will largely lose any entitlement to in-work benefits or support with housing costs.

Let me explore one case. This was a gentleman – let's call him Simon, who had suffered a relationship breakdown, he was in work but his salary stands at about £1,000 a month after deductions. He has two children who live with his partner and for whom he is providing financial support on a voluntary basis. We looked at the economics of him renting a small studio where at least he might be able to meet with his children. Housing cost equations for a single person like him do not make any allowances for costs associated with supporting children. The net impact was that even for a room, he would have been under severe financial stress in meeting his rental costs even with some support in meeting his housing costs.

Moving further out would have meant that his transport costs (let's not forget that research supports the assertion that transport costs in London are the third most expensive compared to other global cities – as reported in The Independent) would have rocketed and further reduced any income. It is a very tough break for people like him who are trying to do the right thing in supporting their children and therefore reducing the potential for poverty in his ex-partner's household.

Shared accommodation rate

We have oft written about the impact of the shared accommodation rate – the rate for housing costs for single people under 35. The Homelessness Monitor tells us that the imposition of this limit has meant that access to any form of private rented accommodation has reduced by 40% for this group.

This is set against a background where any form of hostel accommodation open to this group is contracting and among those providers who are still available, our experience has been that although we continue to make referrals, there is a very “stop-start” situation arising where hostels or other housing providers close their waiting lists and will not accept referrals for maybe 2-3 months. Alongside the longer wait times to get a bed with such providers that means there is additional stress for both us and clients as we find ourselves in the position of supporting clients with temporary accommodation over longer periods than most providers can fairly offer. Most restrict their offer to 28 days.

The administration arrangements associated with Universal Credit

There are a couple of significant points to be made around this new benefit. The introduction of this benefit was accompanied by a fanfare as the benefit construction was supposed to mean that people would be “better off in work”. Well, in the summer 2015 budget, there was an announcement that a reduction in work allowance payments linked to the benefit is planned. What this will do is erode the work incentive element of the benefit.


Also we have seen that there is an impact on “non-dependent deductions” – that is, the deductions for an adult living in the household apart from the holder of the tenancy. This has changed under Universal Credit. Under the old Housing benefit legislation; someone under 25 who was in a receipt of some income-based benefits including Jobseekers Allowance did not impact on the amount of housing costs paid to the holder of the tenancy. This has changed – unless the non-dependent individual meets tightened criteria – to get it, you need to be under 21, be receiving certain benefits such as Pension Credit, some disability benefits, in receipt of Carers Allowance or be the primary carer of a child under 4. Otherwise a flat rate of £70.06 per month is levied.

Again the Welfare Reforms announced in the 2015 budget and Autumn statement, suggest that 18-21s will be excluded from support with independent housing costs or subject to shared accommodation rates in social as well as the private rented housing. Well, the impact of that is hostels who would previously have housed younger people are reviewing their policies as they are finding that for under 35 year olds, the maximum housing cost that clients in receipt of Universal Credit is the shared accommodation rate – this is handled centrally by the DWP. Previously, there was a negotiation between the local authority with respect to intensive housing management costs which included uplifts for their status as a housing association or trust and for the levels of support such as 24 hours staff cover. They are now facing considerable reductions in what rents they can charge unless very specific and limited criteria are met and change their housing models accordingly.

Becoming a housing innovator

All of this means that maybe more rests on shoulders such as ours both in terms of - and I hesitate to use the word - to more aggressively pursue those opportunities that continue to exist but also to become housing innovators in our own right. At least, if we pursue that policy, we can take greater control over the housing stock we can offer to clients providing we can control the risks. Watch this space!

Please sponsor our runners in the British 10K London Run



On Sunday 9th July five of our supporters will be running the British 10K London Run to raise funds for us. The run is through central London, starting at 9.30am in Piccadilly and finishing on Whitehall. Three of the runners are from MyDrive Solutions Ltd, Lyga Ivanovska, Massimiliano Kisvarday and Nhan Phan. Two of the runners are from the Thomas Guy Sub Aqua Club, Alessandra Natale and Olga Baron.

You can support them online at <https://mydonate.bt.com/events/mannasociety/441965> or by sending a cheque made payable to “The Manna Society”.

Your support would be very much appreciated.

Why should we celebrate?

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



This year marks our thirty-fifth anniversary. For a short period of time, I wondered how we might best celebrate it. Then I thought, hang on a minute, should we really be celebrating the fact that hundreds of people still need us on a cold rainy day to address their most basic human needs, like food and housing? No, that's not a nice story to celebrate. But what we do accomplish together with them is definitely worth celebrating. Every step, small or big, they and we have made is worth celebrating. The people who have come and gone, the joy and sadness, not just the triumphs but also the failures and the lessons we have learnt through them, are all worth remembering.

Right from the beginning of the Manna Society, when Nannette Ffrench had the vision to work with homeless people, she did not have any money which she could use to start it. She relied on the goodwill of people who provided the resources she needed to set it up. From the building which the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark generously gave to the then fledgling organisation, to the people who first volunteered their time, skills and money. As a deeply religious woman, having been a nun, she was convinced that God was calling her not to look the other way, but instead to help homeless people in their personal and social problems. The reliance on the Christian community and people of goodwill to support our work has enabled us to focus on solutions which truly address the needs of our clients, as opposed to being sidetracked by sometimes arbitrary targets which some funding bodies set for voluntary organisations.

The way in which we came about has provided us with a strong Christian ethos of justice, love and acceptance for our service-users and for each other. Although we have not always succeeded in living out these high ideals, as far as possible we try to do so. They are our compass. It serves a practical role in our decision-making, in that it allows us to determine the projects we should be pursuing, based on our values, how we should treat our service-users and each other, and establishing our priorities.

For me personally, a reason for celebration is the companionship I have gained of great social justice activists without whom my own journey, as a social justice activist, would have been hard and lonely. I still remember, like it was yesterday, when I first met Nannette in 2001. She was part of a panel of three people who interviewed me before I joined the Manna as a Campaigns Worker. Over the years, my role has of course changed several times, including working as an Advice Worker and for the past 7 years as the Director. During the interview, I felt nervous but Nannette's smile reassured me. She spoke very little and left it to the other panelists to ask me most of the usual interview questions. Looking back, I feel I didn't necessarily have the experience and skills for the job, but it was more of an investment in someone who could end up acquiring them. It's been an amazing opportunity for personal growth and learning to work with Nannette and others.

Above all, a reason to celebrate our anniversary is really the service-users themselves. They are the very reason the Manna exists. We celebrate their lives and the fact that they find solace through us, that they are able to regularly eat a decent meal every day in our centre, that they find accommodation through us even when they have given up hope and despair that no one can help or is bothered to help. For most when they rebuild their lives it is not dramatic. Many, in one way or another, are set on a course to recover their dignity, self-confidence and autonomy. They do not all thank us for this service, but occasionally some do and it can be moving to hear their feedback on the difference we may have made in their lives. It keeps us going.

