



The Manna Society Newsletter

Christmas 2017

Working with homeless people & those in need





Unconditional Giving

By
Karolina Muszynska
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



At our last Annual General Meeting I was deeply touched by the reflections of Father Michael Cooley. Father Michel has recently moved on, after many years of being Parish Priest in Our Lady of Salette and St Joseph Church, situated next to The Manna Centre. As a result of our proximity Father Michael had become very involved with the Manna Day Centre and was always very supportive towards our clients. In his talk he reflected on a few homeless men, he met through his service and on what he had learnt from these people and their stories. Each story was concluded with the learning curve he had made, that helped him to grow as a human being. It made me think a lot and reflect on how much I have learned from our clients and my work. I am not going to talk about that now but I will try to put these reflections together for the spring newsletter. Today I would like to talk about giving. It is a Christmas newsletter so it seems a very appropriate subject to explore.

One of the insights Father Michael shared with us was about giving. He told us a story of Arthur, a homeless man with an alcohol addiction who knocked on the church door and asked for money. It is one of these difficult situations, when you can sense that there is a high probability, that money given would be spent on alcohol. We all face similar situations on the streets of London every day. I bet everyone has been asked by a homeless person for spare change and I am sure many of us have felt a bit of mental discomfort afterwards, irrespective of whether we decided to give or not. If we give we may feel abused, especially if we meet the same person intoxicated a few hours later. We also may feel guilty about contributing to the person's addiction. Not giving leaves us with a bad feeling about ourselves; at the end of the day the lack of a few coins in our pockets would be unnoticeable to us but they could make a big difference in someone else's day.

Father Michel had the same dilemma, when Arthur was asking him for change, but as they got to know each other better, Arthur shared his painful personal history and that made Fr Michael realise that when we give something to others we should do it wholeheartedly, without expecting anything in return. Firstly it is not for us to make a judgement or tell someone how to spend money. A popular saying states: "Do not judge till you have walked a mile in someone else's shoes". Secondly, giving as a simple act of kindness can make an enormous difference to someone who is broken by life. Father Michael realised also that a lot of street beggars often feel excluded from and invisible to society at large. It must be a very humiliating experience to be passed by without any acknowledgement or reaction.

Interestingly enough, while I was writing this article Bandi, our manager forwarded to us a very intriguing article from the New Statement magazine entitled "Why you should give money directly and unconditionally to homeless people", written by the journalist, Matt Broomfield. He argues his point: 'Many street beggars are addicts, yes. Do addicts not deserve food? Wouldn't you want to drink if you were in their position? Don't you get drunk every weekend to cope with work stress anyway? Who are you to tell them what to do with their bodies?' He quotes the founder of homeless charity called User Voice "If your money funds the final hit, accept that the person would rather be dead. If your act of kindness makes him wake up the next morning and decide to change his life, that's nice but not your business either." Undoubtedly, many of you will find that approach controversial, especially when the official approach has been always quite opposite, encouraging us to support homeless charities instead of giving to beggars. Recently, Thames Reach, a big homelessness charity, has launched campaign 'Killing with kindness' urging well-meaning people that giving spare change to people who beg could help to buy the drugs that kill them.

In my personal view both ways of supporting the homeless population are right and serve the purpose. However none of them is more valid than the other. Nevertheless I am really happy to recognise that there are more and more voices advocating on giving money to individuals too. It does feel that the old approach to end homelessness has failed and maybe it is a time to rethink and look at the problem differently.

Giving unconditionally, without expecting anything in return, is a beautiful act on its own. It makes us happy and is also very liberating. As Joan Marques said: "It's easier to take than to give. It's nobler to give than to take. The thrill of taking lasts a day. The thrill of giving lasts a lifetime"

Happy Christmas!



Seeking Refuge
By
Eleanor Smith
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



The other day, I was filling out a referral form with a young homeless refugee who had accessed our advice service, to try to get him a bed in a hostel. One of the questions on the form was about whether he was in touch with his family. When I asked him, he replied that his family had all been killed back in Eritrea, where he was from. He then tried to convey to me through noises and gestures, what it was like to live with such terror as he had come from on a daily basis.

A number of the people coming into the Manna Centre for food and advice are from Eritrea - a country with one of the worst human rights records in the world. Many people leave to avoid the compulsory, indefinite conscription into the military, which is likened to slavery due to forced hard labour, low pay and arbitrary periods of service. The government stands accused of extra-judicial executions and torture, and places severe limits on freedom of assembly and freedom of speech. There are no known oppositional political parties. Press freedom is ranked at the very bottom of a list of 178 countries, below even North Korea. A 2015 UN enquiry into human rights found "a pervasive control system used in absolute arbitrariness to keep the population in a state of permanent anxiety".

This is the kind of situation that the (often relatively young) people who come into our advice office have travelled thousands of extraordinarily dangerous and difficult miles to escape from. Risking kidnapping and exploitation in Libya, and death by drowning as they cross the Mediterranean, they have ultimately ended up homeless on the streets of London.

People seeking asylum in the UK are initially granted accommodation while their claim is processed, though this is often of very poor condition, and in areas of the UK where there are limited services to provide help with integration and advice. When and if they are granted refugee status, they are then given 28 days to leave this accommodation.

That means 28 days to either find a job or start claiming benefits, and secure alternative accommodation. For many people, hampered by a lack of knowledge of UK housing, employment and welfare systems, and often limited English, this is a tall order. People travel to London to increase their chances of securing employment, to try to link into their own communities who might be able to help them, and to access advice services.

Simultaneously they will be dealing with grief and worry at being separated with loved ones, or like my client, losing loved ones to a violent regime, the trauma of having lived with perpetual fear for so long and the isolation of being alone in a strange and often hostile host city.

As individuals we cannot solve the complex political problems afflicting countries such as Eritrea. However, what we can do is offer sanctuary and healing to the survivors who are able to reach us. We can share the plentiful resources that we are so lucky to have, and help people to access housing, education, training, and employment so that they can achieve their full potential. Many of the asylum seekers I meet who are still waiting for their applications to be processed (and therefore are not legally entitled to work) tell me that they are bored, that they want to be useful in the world, and help others the way they have been helped themselves.

We can also challenge harmful and prejudiced narratives about refugees and asylum seekers when we hear them, and instead promote narratives of compassion and kindness to restore to people a faith in the world that has been so severely challenged. Instead of the government's 'hostile environment' for migrants, we should be promoting a 'loving environment', where each human life is valued as much as the next.



The plight of single people and homelessness

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



Single people – are they the forgotten homeless?

As you know, our principal focus is to assist single homeless people. A new report from CRISIS entitled “Moving On: Improving access to housing for single homeless people” refers to this group as England’s forgotten homeless. We are talking here about the need for mainstream accommodation for people with low or no support needs or have very short term support needs that would largely be solved if they were housed. It is thought based on best estimates that as many as 77,000 and maybe up to 110,000 single people will be facing homelessness on any one night. Most of this group will be headed for housing on the private rented sector and our own experience is that 63% of clients using our Advice and Welfare service for assistance with housing are housed in this form of accommodation. It is also a fact that the number of single people offered social housing has fallen from 19,000 in 2007-8 to 13,000 in 2015-16. Of course, social lettings has declined across family groups as well but this has stabilised whereas that of single people continues to decline. Across some local authorities, powers under the 2011 Localism Act have seen exclusion of applicants to the housing register by reason of having arrears from a previous tenancy, anti-social behaviour or criminal convictions which may not give due consideration to the circumstances of the individual concerned.

Private renting – the answer

So, looking back at the private rented sector, it is often the most appropriate and readily available form of accommodation for many single people that we see. However, each placement needs thought. We have just had a case where a client has come to us having fallen foul of the benefit cap. If you are a jobseeker unless you are able to fulfil other conditions such as having been in work for 50 out of the last 52 weeks, this will impact on the individual. It means that for a single person that the maximum weekly benefit to include housing costs will be £296.35.

This client has a rent which amounts to £1,100 per month (which is at the Local Housing Allowance level for the borough in which the client lives) leaving the client with just £184 a month to live on. Clearly this is not feasible and it points to the increasing need for clients either to move away from any of the Inner London boroughs where rents are higher to a less expensive location or to consider a room in shared house where the rent will be lower – when previously, they had been used to separate accommodation in a studio flat or even a one bedroom flat.

Many clients find it hard to consider moving further out as the travel costs become prohibitive in terms of seeking work and once they have work, travelling to and from work particularly if they have to start very early in the morning or are working shifts at unsocial hours when transport is less available. In London, commuting is part of daily life and finding work on your door-step is not always possible. Looking at what we can do for this client, we may be able to get temporary help through applying for a Discretionary Housing Payment which may help with rent payments for a period until other arrangements can be made or until such time as the client’s situation improves through securing work which delivers a weekly income above a specified threshold.

So, work is the answer?

In November, it was 75 years since the publication of the Beveridge Report – widely thought of as the founding document of the welfare state. Beveridge’s brief was to look at eradicating the five great evils - want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness. Today, we have 97% employment - and yet, there has not been the increase to wages that full employment typically brings – in the three months to May this year, average pay adjusted for inflation fell by 0.5% year-on-year. Unstable, precarious, low-paid and temporary jobs play a large part in contributing to this and many of those we see are in these types of jobs. Around 900,000 people are on zero hours contracts according to ONS data.

What we see is clients who are on contracts which end and having thought that we had solved their homelessness are coming back to us as they have lost their housing as their landlord does not want to accept Housing Benefit – there is a re-cycling of homelessness and destitution among clients – the Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines this as someone facing two or more of the following in a month: sleeping rough, having one or no meals a day for two or more days, being unable to heat or to light your home for five or more days, going without weather-appropriate clothes or without basic toiletries. These are the people using our centre and why we provide free food and a clothing store and access to showers.

As I mentioned above, being in work may not solve a client's problems as the bureaucracy or the lead-times to get client's access to the help they may need through support with their housing costs or the client's ability to maintain the record keeping this requires may be adding to the problem. Keeping client's housing stable once we have secured it and they are in work is an area that our Advice and Welfare team spend considerable time on with clients. Clients with see-sawing wages are at risk due to overpayments and underpayments from Housing Benefit or Universal Credit where a portion of the client's housing cost is met through those benefits. People who are working but earning the minimum wage often find it hard to earn enough to meet all their housing costs and they are working all the hours that they can get from their employer – they are not making choices as to when and if they will work. Plus if they are claiming Universal Credit for help with their housing cost, they have to sign a claimant commitment which may tie them into a number of hours in which they have to look for work or increasing the number of hours that they are working – whether this is realistic for the individual concerned is another matter.

To give you an example, we are working to resolve an arrears issue with a client who has been earning between £400 and £750 per month after deductions. When the client is earning around £750 per month (which they were when they first took up the tenancy), then their contribution to their housing costs would be about £200 per month. If they were earning £400, their contribution would be much less. However the client as they are not familiar in working out what their contribution may be has been paying £200 per month whether he was required to or not and is in arrears due to the turnaround times for payment of any additional housing cost support. The client feels under continual pressure from their landlord even though the landlord is only acting quite lawfully in collecting the rent. We are working with them to build their confidence in understanding the system so that they can work within the system to smooth the timing of payments and to build the relationship with their landlord so the landlord sees that the tenant (our client) is managing their rent account more effectively.

To quote Beveridge, *“The State, in organizing security should not stifle incentive, opportunity, and responsibility; in establishing a national minimum, it should leave room and encouragement for voluntary action by each individual to provide more than that minimum for himself and his family.”*

I would say that clients are genuinely seeking to do this but are trying to do so against a background of rising costs in other areas which as low earners is taking a larger part of their disposable income.

It reminds me on a Charles Darwin quote about the impact of institutions on individuals:

“If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin.”

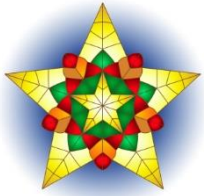
(Charles Darwin, Voyage of the Beagle)

Sadly, it still seems to resonate today. Let's look forward to changing those institutions in the time to come

Tis' the season

Of course, we are approaching the festive season and I am reminded of a trip I took some years ago just before Christmas to Berlin. Whilst there, I visited the Berliner Dom – the Protestant cathedral. In the church a choir was practising the carol “Silent Night” in the original language that it was written in by Father Josef Mohr. It was just so beautiful and moving and in this season, my hope would be that all would “sleep in heavenly peace” without stress and worry.

My best wishes to you all for a happy and peaceful Christmas and my thanks for all that you do for our centre.



Are we throwing compassion out of the window?

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



Like in previous years, one of the highlights at the Manna Centre during this Christmas period is our Christmas dinner. It is always a great occasion for our regular service-users, our staff and volunteers, to celebrate Christmas together. We normally have two sittings and although we say that only those with tickets would be admitted, the reality is that everyone who shows up at the door gets a seat and is served. Last year, we had about 170 guests. Thanks to the generosity of Better Bankside who collect Christmas presents from local businesses and distribute them to local charities helping those in need, every service-user gets a beautifully wrapped Christmas present when they leave.

Christmas week is the only week when we are closed during the year. But rest assured that our service-users are well looked after at Crisis at Christmas, a project which specifically runs during that week, to allow workers from charities like ours the time to be with their families and loved ones. It gives us peace of mind knowing that volunteers from across London spend time with our service-users, providing them with food, advice and company.

Despite the festive mood which Christmas brings, I must confess that I do not particularly feel like celebrating this year. I guess part of it is just my own internal psychological workings, but I also think that part of it is due to my increasing general dissatisfaction with the newly reformed welfare benefit system and the cuts in money for vital services which assist homeless people and those in poverty. I am seeing more and more people who moved away from life on the street, for a long time, returning to it because of cuts in funding for critical services which helped them stay accommodated.

Although I do not normally get personally involved in our work of finding accommodation for people who need it, advice-workers sometimes call on me to interpret for our clients who speaks French or Lingala, if they do not speak English well enough. So, about a month ago, I interpreted for Margaret Shapland, our Senior Advice Worker, when she was working with such a person, let's call her Pamela. Pamela came to the UK as an asylum seeker 5 years ago and has since been living in the UK. A year or so ago, she was granted refugee status which entitles her to claim state welfare benefits as she is not working. She receives Universal Credit which comes as a bundle, including her housing benefits to pay for her housing.

Part of the reason Margaret asked me to interpret for Pamela was to explain to her that she had not paid the full amount she was supposed to pay to her landlord and as a result she had accrued a substantive debt of about a month's rent. Her explanation was that she felt that she had no option but to send some money home because her son was gravely ill and without it, her son would certainly have died. We explained to her that the money was given to her specifically to pay the rent and that she should have given it to her landlord. However, I could not help but wonder how I would have behaved in her place. Thankfully, it has now been possible to set up a system whereby her landlord is paid directly at source. Hopefully we may find a way to help Pamela pay off her debt.

The newly reformed welfare system affect our clients differently. There is a valid argument to be made for some of them to be entrusted with their rent money and be the ones who make arrangements to pay it to their landlords. But clearly not for all, especially for those who may be tempted to use the money to feed their addictions.

For the past three months, I have been working with a client, let us call him Adrian, who I had helped get rehoused, about ten years ago, when I was still an advice worker. Because of his enduring mental health problem, although in general accommodation, he always needed floating support. But such floating support is no longer available to him. Of course he can still access straightforward mental health support but it is not

suitable for addressing his social needs, for example to do with the general disrepair of his flat, or ensuring that annual gas safety checks are carried out, or that he renews his benefits claim on time, that he responds to important correspondence and he attends medical appointments. A floating support service would pick up on such things and prevent problems from boiling over. Without such a service, Adrian has struggled with keeping his tenancy. No one has effectively monitored his situation. His flat has become so hazardous that it has now been boarded up to keep him out, both for his own safety and that of other residents. We now have a fully blown crisis on our hands and with the emergency mental health services we are trying to assist him whilst he is on the streets. But it is proving difficult as he is uncooperative.

There is a sense in which, as a society, we seem to be accepting that things cannot get any better. It seems to be okay nowadays for the government to cut or freeze the welfare benefit budget and pay people on welfare benefits so little money that they can barely afford to live, that it is acceptable for people who rely on the welfare benefit system to be pushed to the margins of society. My general understanding has always been that the state welfare system is supposed to offer us all a safety net in case we lost our job or became ill. But increasingly I feel that this great idea is being challenged to its core in a way I have not seen before. I do not have a magic formula, but I feel strongly enough about it to say that we must preserve this safety net.



Two salient facts



- In the 16-17 financial year 5,380 socially rented homes were built in England (the lowest since records began)
- Between 1980 & 2013 1.7 million homes were sold under the "Right to Buy" scheme



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
@MannaCentre**

Registered Charity No: 294691



Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2017

It costs approx. **£36,000 a month** to run the Manna Centre. The work we do here is a compassionate Christian response to homelessness and poverty. We are dependent on the goodwill of our supporters for our continued existence.



Would you like to support the work of the Manna Centre by making a one-off donation (either by cheque or online via our website)

or

perhaps consider funding our work on a longer term basis by filling in a **Standing Order** form?

If you are a taxpayer and would like to add another 25% to your donation, at no extra expense to yourself, you can do so by simply Gift-Aiding your donation.

Perhaps you would consider leaving us a legacy in your will?

However you choose to support our work we are indeed most grateful.

May God bless you in this holy season & throughout the coming year.

I would like to donate £_____ to the Manna Centre. (Cheques payable to "The Manna Society")

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Email address: _____

If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here ____ and sign below.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Standing Order Form

Name and Address of your Bank/Building Society;

To the Manager of _____ Bank/Building Society

Address: _____

Post Code: _____

Instruction to your Bank/Building Society Manager:

Please pay into the account of the Manna Society – Co-operative Bank plc Account No. 50109537, Sort Code 08-92-99,

The sum of £_____ (amount in words: _____)

Commencing on (date) _____

And also the same amount in every succeeding MONTH / 3 MONTHS / YEAR (circle one as appropriate)

On _____ (date of month)

Until further notice, charging the same to my account:

Name _____ (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature _____

Address _____

Post Code _____

Bank/Building Society Details:

Account Name:.....

Account Number:.....**Sort Code:**.....

If you are a taxpayer and would like to Gift Aid your donation please tick here ____ and sign below.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

***** Please return completed form to The Manna Society, 12 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP ****

