

The Manna Society Newsletter

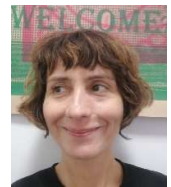
Spring 2021

Working with homeless people & those in need



Looking on the bright side

By
Karolina Muszynska
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



We are definitely approaching more optimistic times – spring is in the air and the rate of Covid cases in the UK is falling significantly. Thanks to an efficient vaccine rollout we are hoping that the lockdown will be lifted in a few months and we will be able to enjoy some freedom at last. I am really looking forward to it! So here is a positive, uplifting story about one of our clients.

Denis is a 54-year-old man from Romania. He is a recovering alcoholic. His story with alcohol goes back to his teenage years. He is a veteran of various rehabilitation programmes back in Romania. When he came to the UK 14 years ago, he had been sober for a number of years and remained so for another 13 years until he relapsed over a year ago.

He came to the Manna in mid-December, exhausted from rough sleeping and drinking. He managed to maintain abstinence for 3 days and was begging for a place to stay. He was terrified that if he spent another night outside (it was quite cold back then) he would relapse into drinking in no time. Denis came across as someone who was very sad and hopeless. His voice sounded flat and he could not keep eye contact. He told me he was ashamed of himself and felt suicidal.

In cooperation with the local outreach team he was referred to Crisis at Christmas. They put him into hotel accommodation for two weeks so he could have a respite from the roughness of a street life during the festive period. In the meantime, we had done some groundwork with him to explore more of his situation and to look at his entitlement to benefits. It transpired that Denis has been consistently working in the UK and already had 'Settled Status' in place. Settled Status is a form of immigration leave granted to EU citizens living in the UK for at least 5 years. It is the equivalent of "indefinite leave to remain" and gives EU citizens the rights to work, to rent and access to public funds in the UK.

Denis had a very poor understanding of his rights and was deeply convinced that he was not entitled to any welfare support. He thought that the only option for him was to find work as soon as possible, so he could rent a room. I felt that it was an impossible mission at that moment as it was just before Christmas and we were in a lockdown and job offers were very limited. Denis's physical and mental state was still very fragile and he was in the first weeks of abstinence after his relapse. I suggested that it would be much better if he took some time off from searching for work and focus on getting better and stronger on the addiction front. I offered to assist him to make a Universal Credit claim and Denis agreed, still convinced that he had no entitlement.

On 4th of January his place with Crisis at Christmas ended and we got lucky again when the winter shelter offered him a space. I say lucky as this year winter shelters could only offer a very limited number of spaces due to social distancing rules.

Just a few weeks later, his Universal Credit claim was approved and we could start discussing long-term housing options with him. Denis was already a different man – still anxious but nowhere close to how he was when we first met. Now he kept eye contact and smiled from time to time. He was in a much more optimistic mood and he was more open. He shared with me that he plays the guitar and sings his own songs.

I was not sure what would be the best option for him in terms of housing. Was he ready for an independent life or would it be better for him to get into some sort of supported accommodation? Both options had their pros and cons. Denis was open to both, he was still amazed that he would have a roof over his head. His only condition was not to be placed in one particular borough of London as he wanted to steer clear of his drinking buddies. As supported accommodation means sharing and as Denis was over 50 years old we decided that he deserved the comfort of his own place and referred him into privately rented accommodation. He accepted a studio flat in North London and moved there at the end of January, just when Universal Credit gave him his first payment. He is still there.

It has been an amazing journey – in Denis’ story all the elements fell into place at the right time. It could have been a completely different story, if for example we could not have placed him into the shelter after Crisis at Christmas had ended or if there had been a delay with his Universal Credit payment. Bearing in mind that during the pandemic nothing is straight forward in our work, it was a very smooth transition. Of course, it may not work for Denis in the long run. He will face temptations and there is always a risk of another relapse but at least we have provided him with a safe environment to start his journey of recovery, without which it would have been a very bumpy road indeed.



What are we to do this Easter?

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



Two episodes in Jesus’s life on earth inspire our practice of Lent: his fast of forty days and nights, before he began his ministry, and the week leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection. This explains why we’re encouraged, as Christians, to temporarily give up our comfort, during Lent, in order to draw closer to God in our inner being. In doing so, we identify more closely with Jesus’s earthly suffering and celebrate with him his triumphant victory on the cross at Easter.

There isn’t anything inherently virtuous or saintly about giving up sugar for Lent. But such a sacrifice, by momentarily foregoing our physical comfort, with reverence for God, can be used as a tool to gain spiritual comfort, in our inner being. This inner comfort is what Christians traditionally call the Peace of God. It doesn’t of course come through sacrifice alone; it can come through other practices like prayer and meditation.

Following this practice, I first gave up sugar in my tea and coffee when I first joined the Manna Society, twenty years ago. In those days, we used to have tea together as a team, in the afternoon, and we’d have a lot of banter and discussions about life in general. At times, those conversations veered towards Christian Ethics, what it is to be a Christian, and the meaning of our work. It was through one such discussion that I was challenged to give up sugar for Lent and I did; the result is that I can now drink tea and coffee without sugar and enjoy it; although occasionally I still take sugar in my tea. For those of you who naturally like tea or coffee without sugar, this might sound trivial, but for some of us who have a sweet tooth, believe me, it was a big sacrifice.

However, Christian living isn’t just about achieving personal salvation or enlightenment in our inner being, for ourselves. It’s also about achieving social justice and harmony for all. And oftentimes we miss this aspect.

We're so focused on achieving our own inner peace and personal contentment that nothing else seems to matter. We must balance our quest for inner peace with a quest for outer peace and harmony, for other people, which comes through social justice. We can't just be concerned for ourselves but also for others. We can't truly love ourselves without loving our neighbour; we can't have one without the other, they go hand in hand. St John goes even further by saying that we cannot love God without loving our brothers and sisters (1 John 4:21).

I'm encouraged to see that many churches adopt this approach, not just encouraging Christians to use Lent for personal physical sacrifice, as a tool to draw near to God, but also as a time for increased social action for our neighbours. Once we establish this balance, we can confidently pray the prayer that Jesus taught us: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!" and seek to live God's Kingdom in our inner being as well as in our community. This Kingdom is based on God's principles summed up in the command to love and care for each other.

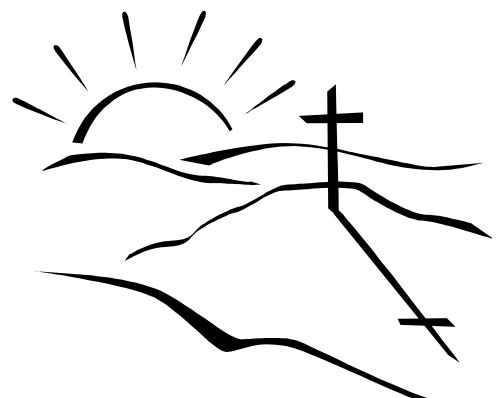
The Manna Society presents an opportunity for Christians and churches to take action in response to the needs of our brothers and sisters who are affected by homelessness and poverty. To cater for the 120 people, or so, who come to our services every day of the week. To offer these services, we've relied on the Archdiocese of Southwark (R.C.) who generously provide us with the building and the wider Christian Community chipping in with donations in money and in kind.

This support has kept us afloat for the 39 years we've been in existence. It's allowed us to feed and clothe people; give them a chance to have a shower; access valuable healthcare; entertain them with music and social media or look for a job in our computer room (although we've had to suspend this because of the Covid-19 Pandemic); and listen confidentially, one-to-one, to over one thousand people, every year, in order to address their problems which caused them to become homeless. Through this work, we're able to rehouse about 250 people every year.

Although the number of people sleeping rough in England have gone down by a third in the past year, from 4,266 in 2019 to 2,688 in 2020, in large part due to increased emergency accommodation provision to homeless people during the pandemic, a lot more still needs to be done. For a start, there are not enough suitable and genuinely affordable accommodation for people still in emergency accommodation to move into. For those who are moved into private accommodation, as tends to be the case, they may find that if they were to find work, their wages wouldn't cover the cost of the rent. As a result, charities like us advocate for a complete system overhaul to address systemic issues which prevent people on low income from enjoying decent housing in England. One of the solutions which the government ought to seriously consider is to reinvest massively into social housing so as to make housing costs more affordable to homeless people and people on low income.

The public is instrumental in swaying government to take more drastic action to address this problem, just like in the mid-1960s, when the UK experienced a similar crisis of homelessness and poor housing. The trigger for this policy change was the social realist drama, *Cathy Come Home*, which shocked the public to their core by showing what was happening in towns and cities. It prompted a parliamentary debate which ultimately led to the development of more social housing. Perhaps we could affect a similar sea-change; you could write to your MP or Councilor about genuinely affordable housing in your local community and let us know how you get on.

This Easter let's pray for another *Cathy Come Home* moment!





The ultimate test

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



“The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world that it leaves to its children.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Pastor and victim of Nazi persecution

I chose this quote to start this little article because when facing the horrendous threat and consequences of the pandemic, we have been given an opportunity to think again about how people who have become homeless can be helped.

At the end of last week, the rough sleeping figures for the last twelve months were published. The statistics showed that rough sleeping had dropped by 37% in the past year – but still, the figures were up by 52% since 2010.

The point was made by the Chief Executive of CRISIS – Jon Sparkes, that

“The last 12 months have shown that when the political will is there, and homelessness is given the priority it deserves, we can bring people off the streets. But we must be clear: while positive, these statistics do not represent the full picture. Throughout the pandemic we have seen new people forced on to our streets and every person sleeping rough is one too many.”

Let’s look at why although welcoming the work done through the “Everyone In” initiative, there is still much to be done.

People are still dying as a result of homelessness

Research by the Museum of Homelessness through a process of making a large number of Freedom of Information requests were able to identify 979 deaths; this was 37% increase in fatalities over the previous year.

Just about 3% were directly attributable to COVID itself but what the pandemic has thrown into greater relief are the underlying reasons why these deaths occur and the Museum of Homelessness mooted that the series of cuts to important services prior to the pandemic may have played a significant role – here we are talking about cuts in services in the areas of mental health, welfare, addiction and housing services.

Being able to link into support services without very long waiting times can be critical in maintaining the most vulnerable. Homeless Link research, for instance, found that 80 per cent of homeless people in England reported that they had mental health issues, with 45 per cent having been diagnosed with a mental health condition.

Under-estimating the numbers of homeless individuals needing assistance

The National Audit Office reported that the number of rough sleepers identified as needing emergency help was probably eight times greater than official estimates. So the “Everyone In” scheme relied on information that the numbers needing help were in the order of 4,266 individuals.

Audited figures show that between March and November 2020 showed that over 33,000 individuals accessed the scheme. It was also reported that between April-June 2020, that in the capital referrals to Streetlink (the service charged with distributing reports of individual rough sleeping) showed that there was a 76% uplift in

referrals in London itself and these referrals made up 71% of all alerts received. It was our experience that there appeared to be extreme pressure and our response was to try and arrange accommodation of a more permanent nature with those providers who were still accepting clients into suitable longer-term accommodation.

Additionally our experience has been that many approaching us are first-time rough sleepers who were supporting themselves – albeit somewhat on the edge, before the pandemic struck – however, a combination of factors pulled the rug from under their feet and exacerbated issues which were already in existence – loss of work as they were, for the greatest part, working in industries such as hospitality most adversely affected by the pandemic, informal arrangements with friends where they had been living became more difficult to sustain due to fear of transmission and losing rented accommodation as they ran out of funds. This left them in a position with no funds and no place to call home and with little or no knowledge of where or how they could access homelessness services; précising what one client said to us “I stumbled across your service and one of your staff sensed that I did not know what to do and talked to me recommending that I call the centre advice line to fix an appointment”.

Once lockdown starts to lift and perhaps before other parts of the economy start to revive, we will see people being homeless as they have been on furlough but their industry has contracted and they may find they cannot return or that the business that they worked for was not able to sustain and that they have no job to return to.

The dearth of truly affordable housing means that the housing crisis has not gone away

Whilst the private rented sector has provided an invaluable resource, there is evidence of overcrowding particularly in high rent areas with renters having to compromise on space – the Government’s English Housing Survey latest figures for 2018-19 showed overcrowded homes at 6.2% of the private rented market and the number of homes failing to meet the Decent Homes Standard stood at 25%. Rent management has meant that rises in the local housing allowance level but the retention of the benefit cap at the same level has put pressure on renters with many making up their rent from their personal allowance if they are in receipt of benefits – a large number of our clients are people who are seeking to get back into the job market and thus do not meet the exemptions that would mean the benefit cap would not apply.

We have been lucky in that we have been able to negotiate with some landlords to reduce the rent or bring it back to a rate where a tenant will not be required to make a contribution from their personal benefit. Of course, the only real solution is to continue to put pressure on the government to press for the construction of properly affordable homes.

But what has been remarkable throughout this time is the resilience and positive attitude of so many of the people who have come our way over the last year – the old adage that hope springs eternal really rings true.

The phoenix rising from the ashes

Greek mythology tells of the phoenix as a long-lived bird cyclically regenerating to rise again – a symbol of hope and renewal.

Just recently, we were ringing our clients to see if they wanted to participate in an interview about their experience of homelessness during the pandemic. What struck me whilst doing this task was what beacons of

positivity so many of those clients are. I am going to give you a little overview of the experiences of just two of them:

Let's talk about Anthony

He came to us as he had been on a zero hours contract and when COVID became an issue lost any hope of retaining work. He had approached the local authority for access to emergency housing but was turned down but the local authority told him to get in touch with us.

From our point of view, it was imperative that he should not be left in a position where he was on the street and at risk of contracting this dreadful virus. We successfully persuaded the local authority to place him into temporary hotel accommodation. At that time he had no funds as his Universal Credit had not kicked in. We made sure that he was supported to receive his entitlement. He was very short of funds so in the interim we topped up his Oyster card so he could travel to various locations for food.

We provided referrals to food banks and a little later on he became one of the clients to whom we were delivering hot food as part of a scheme in conjunction with the local authority. Latterly, we helped negotiate a revised rent when he was placed in private rented accommodation.

When I had the opportunity of speaking to him more recently, he told me that he wanted greater control over his working life and had decided to become self-employed as it gave him greater latitude to build work from a variety of sources. He was happy with his choice, self-confident and looking forward to a better future.

Now, moving on to Christina

Christina reached out to us as she had contacted an organisation that had in previous years been providing shelter spaces but were not able to continue that model for this season due to COVID. She had been working and had been living with relatives but asked to leave. After that she had been managing to live on what remained of her funds in backpacker accommodation. Those funds were now about to run out. We were able to secure a place in a shelter who were providing rooms in hotels but the space would not become available until they officially opened for the winter season. Christina just did not have enough funds to sustain the backpacker accommodation. We were able to help her out by using funds from our resources to bridge the gap with accommodation.

She is an enterprising person and once we secured accommodation for her was able to find employment albeit for two days a week at this point.

In a world where recently each day brings the unhappy news of job losses, Anthony and Christina show that once you have a safe space to live in, you have the head space to work towards your future.

Bonhoeffer's statement applies because during this time, the state has stepped in to help and combined with the efforts of organisation like ours and in other sectors, we have an alchemy that can contribute to a positive future and where people will re-build their lives in a successful and hopefully sustainable way.

Let's hope that this does not drift away when lockdown and the current restrictions become a memory and out of all this we see a society that supports one another, particularly those at most risk and in the words of Captain Sir Tom Moore on reaching his target of 100 laps -

'For all those people who are finding it difficult at the moment: the sun will shine on you again and the clouds will go away.'



After the pandemic: Taking stock

By

Eleanor Smith
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I'm writing this the day after the annual snapshot of rough sleeper figures was released. This year, with a little more fanfare and build up, as some of the first figures on which to judge 'Everyone In' – the pandemic provoked effort to make sure no one would have to sleep rough. In fact, the BBC came to visit us, and filmed our little centre for the 6 O'clock news. This goes to show that there is a huge amount of attention and public concern directed at homelessness right now. I do wonder if this shared mass experience of feeling threatened and vulnerable has contributed to a renewed empathy and collective determination to make sure no one is left out in the cold. As things change rapidly for all of us, there is also an understanding that the nature of homelessness itself is changing. The BBC interviewed one of our clients, who, like so many others had become homeless as a result of losing work in the hospitality industry. The livelihood wrecking pandemic has demonstrated starkly how frighteningly easy it is to become homeless. There go I, but for the grace of God, we all think.

Of course, this surge in funding and the combined efforts of local government, charities, health and social care services, and not least community and faith groups, has led to a fall in the numbers of rough sleepers – down 37% from last year.

It's important to note that the way data is currently collected about rough sleepers is very approximate, and describes a 'snapshot' of people seen sleeping rough by local authority workers and outreach teams - that is people actually sleeping outside; in doorways, on benches, on the pavement, with sleeping bags and blankets. When local authorities are unable to do this, they provide an estimate based on information from local agencies working with rough sleepers.

This means many people who have nowhere to sleep are missed by the count. Many new rough sleepers we work with tell us they are too afraid, and too cold to actually sleep during the night. Instead, they walk around all night, and catch sleep during the day when it is warmer and there is less chance of attack; or they sleep on buses, tubes and trains, in 24 hour fast food places, or other places that are more 'off the radar' than a shop doorway.

It is also important to remember that these figures represent a particular kind of homelessness, arguably the most brutal and dangerous form – that of rough sleeping. Many more people are homeless and living in temporary accommodation, short term transitional hostels, and sleeping on friend's floors and sofas. Another way that homelessness is measured and recorded in official statistics is through the number of 'households' (couples and people with children, as well as individuals) who have gone to their local council for help with homelessness and have been placed in temporary accommodation by the council. To qualify for this, the household has to have been living in the local area, they have to be 'eligible' i.e. have some right to be in the UK and claim welfare benefits, they have to prove their homelessness, and they have to be considered 'more vulnerable than the ordinary person while homeless'. By this measure, which by no means includes everyone who is made homeless, or who even approaches their local council for help, homelessness has been rising steadily since 2011. 2020's figures showed 98,300 households in temporary accommodation, a 14% increase since 2019. This figure includes 127,240 children.

A more recent figure has been derived from freedom of information requests to local authorities, supplemented by government data. These requests showed that during the pandemic, 70,000 households asked their local council for help after becoming homeless, or while about to be made homeless, a shocking figure. This number also includes people who might not have got help from their local council, or who might have been prevented from becoming homeless in the first place.

So the numerical picture we have of homelessness is complex and does not always tell the whole story. It is complicated by the very diverse nature of homelessness, each situation as unique as each person and yet highlighting the same shared basic needs and vulnerabilities, as well as the same gaps in the system. At The Manna Centre, we continue to see a steady stream of people who are homeless – either rough sleeping, in temporary accommodation or sofa surfing. The statistics give us some way to get an overview of what is happening and how we should respond. But they often underestimate the scale of need, and of course there will always be people who buck the trend. Like our client Sam* who has been sofa surfing for the past 3 years, and rough sleeping for the past month. Outreach workers found him, but emergency bed spaces are getting scarcer now, and they were not able to immediately help. We managed to get Sam into his own private rented studio, where he told us he had the best sleep of his life after a month on the streets.

As we leave winter and come into spring, the end of the pandemic also seems to be in sight, and there is hope and warmth in the air. At this time, we might start to think about what we have lost to the pandemic, but also the gains: the concerted mutual aid efforts, the bringing inside of rough sleepers. We grieve for what we have lost but hope for change. I am hoping that after a year of huge upheaval, we can retain the political will to bring people inside from the streets. However, I think The Manna Centre will always need to exist, for all those who slip through the net, whose situation doesn't fit comfortably into set categories.

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