

The Manna Society Newsletter
Summer 2022

Working with homeless people & those in need



IT TAKES HEART TO FIGHT FOR SOMETHING
THAT SO MANY CONSIDER A LOST CAUSE.
A STRONG MIND TO BREATHE LIFE INTO THAT
CAUSE AND PROVE SO MANY WRONG.
KEEP YOUR HEART TRUE AND YOUR
MIND STRONG. DETROIT.
FEL3000TT

Photo by Travis Rupert



A return to normality!

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



As many of you who regularly read our newsletters know, we have gone through several adaptations, keeping pace with government guidance on the spread of Covid-19 and our own risk assessment of our workings. Although government removed all remaining Covid-related restrictions back in March, based on our own risk assessment, we continued to limit the number of people we could let into the day centre at any one time to 40. But, subsequently, following another risk assessment and internal discussions, we finally decided to remove all remaining restrictions starting from 16 May. This means that from this date service-users have been able to come and go freely as they wish, just like before the onslaught of the pandemic. However, we have reduced the number of seats inside to encourage a better flow of people coming in and out of the centre, as opposed to people seating around in the centre for the entire time we are open, which would keep the place congested.

But removing all restrictions does not mean that we have thrown caution to the wind. It simply means, just like the rest of society, we have learnt to live with the virus. For instance, we continue to encourage staff and service-users to be fully vaccinated and to keep pace with top-up doses as they become available. We also ventilate our premises as much as we can, including opening up windows in the centre, and we have recently replenished our ventilation units in our shower facilities and in our advice offices. Ventilation not only limits the spread of Covid-19, but also other air-borne diseases like influenza, whopping cough, and tuberculosis.

Here below is a breakdown of all our services and what is happening.

Food

Leading up to last Christmas, we offered takeaway meals to those who came to us. On average, between 120 and 150 people came for food. However, numbers went drastically down once we resorted to offering all services indoor; about 60 people came inside for food at the beginning of the year. But since then, numbers have steadily increased; about 90 people to 100 are currently coming into the centre for food and other services.

Just like before the pandemic, opening hours remain the same. We are open from 8:30am to 1:30pm. We make our own sandwiches which we give to people when they arrive, followed by cereal or porridge for breakfast at 10:00am. At 11:30, we serve lunch till we close at 1:30pm. Throughout the day, tea or coffee is served.

Shower facilities

As a result of our recent review, all three cubicles in the men's showers are now in full use at the same time. Given the low number of women coming into our centre, the women's shower has been unaffected during much of the pandemic, and even after this post-pandemic period. Compared with about 95% of men, only 5% of our service-users are women. Before 16 May, only 2 men's shower cubicles were in use, with the middle cubicle closed off to limit the number of people who could use the facilities at any one time. Although we have reopened the middle shower to allow more people to have a shower, at any one time, we still ensure that no one queues inside the shower area, unlike in the past. We have introduced a daily list so that people who want to have a shower can book themselves in on the day and be told when they can have it. It prevents the shower area becoming too congested. About 20 people have been coming for a shower every day.

Welfare and Housing Advice

Until very recently, our advice workers were working with our service-users via videoconference (Zoom and Google), with the advice worker seated in their office and the service-user in an interview room. Although both the advice worker and the service-user were in the same building, they used technology to communicate with each other. Occasionally they could see each other face-to-face, when deemed necessary, but they had to keep their masks on. The way it worked was that service users had to first phone our advice line and be offered advice over the phone. Depending on the case, the service-user could then be given an appointment to see an advice-worker at the centre.

But since our recent review, although the telephone advice continues, people are now able to come in person and be given an appointment, subject to availability. They can do so Monday to Friday during our opening hours. When 2 advice-workers are on duty, up to 12 people can be seen in one day, including 4 pre-arranged appointments. When only 1 advice-worker is on duty, up to 6 people can be seen, including 2 pre-arranged appointments. Our advice line is open from 10am to 1pm, Monday to Friday, and service-users can access it by ringing 020 7403 1931 and choosing option 1.

IT Sessions

After being closed for the whole duration of the pandemic, we are working towards restarting our IT sessions, subject to renewing our stock of computers which we have used for the past seven years. Part of this preparation also includes recruiting volunteers to oversee the sessions. We hope to resume this service in the summer.

Healthcare

During much of the pandemic, the Health Inclusion Team (HIT), who are part of the NHS, have worked alongside us, treating our service-users, giving invaluable advice to both staff and service-users about how to keep safe, and being a reassuring presence in our midst. Clinics are held every Wednesday, from 9am to 1pm.

Clothing

We have also gone back to our old system of requiring everyone who needs clothes to drop in on Mondays and Wednesdays at 8:30am. When they arrive, they ask for a ticket, and wait for their number to be called out between 10:00am and 11:00am to access the clothing store. They then can choose 3 items of clothing. In some cases, we give more than 3 items of clothing depending on the person's circumstances.

Celebrating 40 years of service

Whatever the Manna has achieved has been as a result of everyone chipping in, with time, energy, prayer, goodwill, resources and money. Service-users, staff, supporters, and trustees, we are all part of the same family working together to eradicate homelessness and poverty. Much still remains to be done, but much has also been done in the past 40 years of our existence. Both Archbishop John Wilson, the Archbishop of Southwark (R.C.), and Bishop Christopher Chessun, the Bishop of Southwark (CofE), have accepted our invitation to be keynote speakers at our 40th Anniversary event on 26th October 2022, from 6pm to 8pm, to be held at the Manna Centre. We would love for as many of you as possible to join us at the event as we mark this important milestone. Wishing you and your loved ones God's blessings!



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The most important words in our language right now – eat, heat and being in secure housing

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



It seems bizarre to consider the stark choices that many in our society are having to make when we live in the fifth largest economy in the world. It has been a fairly tumultuous post-pandemic period with cost pressures on most of us but also a plethora of analysis and comment. Fairly recently, CRISIS published their regular report on Homelessness in England called the Homelessness Monitor for this year (2022) using data compiled in 2021. The Chancellor follow-up to his Spring statement broke on May 26 which prompted a response from Shelter part of which is quoted below:

“Millions of people across the country will be breathing a sigh of relief following the Chancellor’s package of support. Cash to keep the lights on and put food on the table is vitally important, but so is keeping a roof over your head – and one-off support payments won’t last that long” – Polly Neate CEO – Shelter

Further into Polly Neate’s response, she elaborates on the relationship between daily essentials and the risk of becoming homeless:

“Families face an annual shortfall of £540 on average for a modest two-bedroom rented home – with many dipping into money meant for essentials like food or heating just to keep a roof over their head. It’s no wonder tenants live in daily fear of losing their home. Allowing homelessness to rise will cost the government a lot more in the long-run, and ruin countless lives along the way. The government needs to go beyond these one-off payments and reverse the housing benefit squeeze – it’s the only way to keep more people in their homes during the cost-of-living crisis.” So, let’s look a take a look at what the latest statistics are telling us.

“We are expecting a tidal wave”

So said a local authority representative when responding to the Homelessness Monitor researchers.

The Monitor estimates that the number of homeless people is expected to jump by one-third in England over the period up to 2024; a tidal wave due to a combination of the rising cost of living, benefit freezes and the end of the COVID eviction ban. Unsurprisingly, the trend will be most pronounced in London.

The expectation is that most of those displaced through loss of accommodation will end up “sofa-surfing”.

In the private rented sector, for example, what are called “no fault” evictions (where a tenant is given due notice and the landlord can ask them to leave without any reason) rose by 42% during the period from October to December 2021. A ban on this form of eviction has been mooted but as yet no legislation has been put in place. Apart from this, the Homeless Monitor reported that the private rental market was being squeezed due to landlords exiting the sector, greater selectivity in the selection of tenants and rising rents proving to be factors in reducing the amount of available private rented properties. When so much emphasis is placed on the placement of those who find themselves homeless on accessing private rented accommodation, these are not glad tidings.

Even among those in tenancies acknowledged as being more secure than the private sector i.e. housing association renters are more on the edge of potential homelessness according to a new report from Demos (the cross party think tank) entitled *The Bottom Line* which has suggested that the rising cost of living risks sending more people into rent arrears, even among those living in the relatively secure environment of housing association renters. Low and fluctuating income and large, unexpected costs are the main drivers in housing association tenants falling into arrears. Overall social renters have the highest rate of poverty at 46% due to their lower incomes.

Ms Neate reflected on the way in which benefits are structured at the moment and we move onto that consideration in particular Universal Credit housing costs/Housing Benefits.

“Our basic rate of benefits is at its lowest real rate for 30 years and this is causing avoidable hardship. The Government must do the right thing and strengthen this vital public service” Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Earlier this year, Joseph Rowntree Foundation published its report “UK Poverty 2022: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK” just prior to the economic shocks that have occurred from February 2022 onwards. Even then, the report stated that households on low income could expect to spend at least 18% of their household incomes after housing costs on energy but when it comes to single person households on low incomes are likely to rise to 54% - that’s a 21 percentage point increase since 2019/20. The report also found that lone parents and couples without children will spend around a quarter of their incomes on energy bills, an increase of almost 10 percentage points in the same period.

JRF also reported that families receiving these benefits have very high levels of poverty, with more than half of individuals in families in receipt of Universal Credit and its predecessor legacy benefits being in poverty, with 43% of households in receipt of Universal Credit being food insecure – the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations defines a person being in food insecurity as being when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life.

So let’s look at the squeeze on the housing support that people might expect.

Back in December 2021, the Government introduced a £316 million funding package to prevent homelessness called the Homelessness Prevention Grant to support homeless households and those at risk of becoming homeless. The fund was allocated to all councils responsible for housing in England based on local homelessness need in individual areas, and councils will be able to use the money to help people find a new home, move into temporary accommodation, and access support for evictions to prevent homelessness before it occurs. The package also includes £5.8 million for those forced into homelessness by domestic abuse, which will ensure that “priority need” is given to people in abusive situations. It is a welcome package indeed. However, on the flip side of the coin, charities are calling for the Government to further increase the Local Housing Allowance (the amount of rent that Universal Credit will contribute to an applicant’s housing cost) to more accurately reflect the rents that people are being asked to pay. The allowance was rebased in 2020 which did increase the rate of the allowance but this went hand in hand with a freeze on the rates at March 2020 levels.

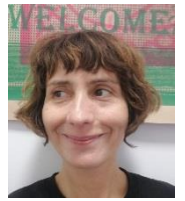
Shelter looked at the relationship between required spending and rents and found that on average, households renting a two-bedroom home at the current local housing allowance rate will have a shortfall of £10.53 a week – more than £45 a month – between the housing cost assistance via Universal Credit or Housing Benefit and their rent. That would mean to avoid falling into rent arrears and eviction, households now face hard choices over how to make up this shortfall. For a household without children on a low income, making up the shortfall would mean the equivalent of skipping a weekly food shop a month and still having to make savings elsewhere – it is a real choice between eviction and eating.

The main cause of homelessness is an inability to afford housing.

It follows that the government need to re-link housing benefits to the real cost of renting, which rose by 10.9% in London last year which meant that they were higher than pre-pandemic levels. Private rents overall are rising at the fastest rate in five years. Now more than ever, given the cost of the living crisis, helping people to pay their rent is now an essential interim measure, until there’s enough investment in the building of permanent and decent social homes that ordinary people can afford to rent without recourse to benefits.



Long term relationships
By
Karolina Muszynska
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I have realised recently how important it is for our service users that our staff team here has not changed much over the years. Most of our workers have been at Manna for decades, we literally grow old together with some of our clients (and each other). It is interesting how you build relationship with people by just seeing them in the centre for a long period on a daily basis. We know their names, habits, stories – they know ours. I believe it makes a huge difference especially for those most vulnerable, socially isolated service users who find interactions with others difficult. If you suffer from anxiety, it is easier for you to cope if you are in a predictable and safe environment with friendly faces you know. It is also easier to seek help or advice from someone you are familiar with and who you trust. It helps if they know something about you already, so they know how to tailor their support.

We see a lot of returning clients in the service. We have known some of them for decades. Like for example Siddique, a refugee from Somalia, who I have first met over 10 years ago in our advice service. At that time I had just started working for Manna while Siddique had just started his independent life after leaving the care system (he came to the UK as an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child). Back then his English was poor and he needed support to apply for benefits and to deal with other issues. My English was not perfect either. We helped him to find accommodation back then and he disappeared from our radar for a couple of years. Siddique returned to the Manna only a couple of months ago for help with his failed naturalisation application. I was very impressed and happy to hear how well he was doing now. He was still living in the accommodation we helped him find years ago. He was working full time and his English has improved a great deal - he passed the “Life in UK” and English language tests to be able to apply for British citizenship. My colleague Eleanor has successfully assisted him to challenge the Home Office’s decision and he was granted British citizenship. Last week I had the honour to confirm his identity for his first British passport! What a journey it was for him! Well done Siddique!

Another client who I am proud of is Arturas. Arturas comes from Lithuania and is in his early fifties now. He is a heavy drinker. I have known him for at least 7 years but his engagement with the advice service was very chaotic until only a few months ago. In the past, he would come and ask for help and then disappear for a couple of months. He was notorious for not turning up for his appointments or for attending them too intoxicated to do any work with him. Constantly losing his mobile phone and documents, impossible to contact. Half a year ago, he re-engaged with the advice service again. He is still drinking; he would still be slightly intoxicated during our appointments but at least he keeps them. From around 10 appointments we had in the last 3 months, he only missed 1. He follows up on the actions we agreed and he has the same mobile number since he has re-engaged. Well done Arturas! Every journey begins with a single step!

I remember that after few years of working in my role as an advice worker I had a mild work crisis. I was questioning the purpose of my work, as I could see no change in my clients’ lives. The same people I met in the centre at the beginning of my work were still there despite my efforts to help them to move on. Now, with the passing of time I am starting to understand that everyone has their own pace and sometimes we need to wait a long time to see a small change. Therefore, I am glad that I stuck to Manna for over 11 years so I can see that change and I am looking forward to see more.



Photo by Andrea Piacquadio



The flexible approach

By
Eleanor Smith
Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



This last month I shifted fully into The Manna's post pandemic operation by moving back to my downstairs office, where I can again see clients face to face. Over the pandemic, I had been working remotely i.e. sitting clients in our downstairs office and seeing them via conference call in my upstairs office. I've been asked about the security of having unattended laptops in the office nearest the front door and I'm pleased to say that no laptop was ever stolen, thrown on the floor or even given so much as a frustrated thump whilst being left alone in a room with our clients. Which is probably more than I can say for laptops in other hastily thrown together home working situations across the country.

It is great to be back face to face, though I do miss the proximity to the kitchen and therefore biscuits offered by my upstairs office. I have missed the sense of connection with people that isn't really possible via a screen. It is easier to quickly get a sense of someone, and to give them a sense of being with another person, that words alone can't provide. I think this is vital for quickly being able to build a sense of trust and reassurance, which we really need to establish quickly in the advice service, especially with clients who have had bad experiences with other people in the past. A part of our work in the advice service is about providing practical, concrete information and assistance, but an equally big part is making people feel valued, and like they deserve to be happy and secure. We have also, since I last wrote for this newsletter, re-opened our drop in service, so that people can be seen on the day rather than having to make an appointment.

This is also a relief, as it means we are more likely to be able to respond quickly to emergencies and be responsive to people who find it difficult to keep appointments. For example, our young and vulnerable European client Adrian* who suffers from long standing mental health problems, and urgently needs to make a late application for settled status in the UK. Adrian would find it really difficult to keep an appointment in mind, but whenever he comes into the day centre, he can be encouraged to put his name down to see an advice worker, by the project workers who he knows and trusts.

We have also kept some appointments, in order to better serve those who need planned, long term work, and some degree of routine and stability in our work together. For example, my client Rosa*, who has stable housing but has some complex benefits problems which need disentangling. Rosa has had a difficult life and suffers from anxiety. We both need to know that there will be set, ringfenced times when we can call the DWP and work on her case, rather than her travelling into the centre, not knowing whether or not she can be seen. Plus, we've also retained the advice phone line, for people who do not need a face to face appointment but do need to be able to quickly get through to someone and get expert advice. Our clients now have a wider range of options on how to access support than ever before. This is important, because different people do need different things, and we can offer a relatively tailored approach, rather than the one size fits all offer that many people struggle with. The pandemic with its disruption of business as usual was an opportunity for us to re-visit how we did things and see if we could make them better.

Sadly, not all opportunities to make things better post pandemic have been realised. I wonder if in years to come, I will look back on a magical time when a serious and concerted effort to get everyone off the streets was made and worked! Demand for our services from rough sleepers had never been so low as it was over the last two years. Unfortunately, we are now seeing the old situation creeping back, with very few emergency options for us to quickly move people off the streets. While we can normally help people with housing in the longer term, it is often not a quick process, as Universal Credit applications are made, hostel referrals sent and waiting lists joined. Meanwhile sleeping rough is dangerous, demoralising, and makes it difficult for people to function

well enough to do the work required to get them off the street. I met a newly rough sleeping gentleman in the advice office the other day who was so sleep deprived he could barely remember his own date of birth accurately. After a good night's sleep, he was unimpaired and back to his normal functioning.

There are lots of good and innovative ideas around for solving street homelessness through long term work, such as housing first, or utilising trauma informed or harm reduction approaches. But the resources to quickly stabilise new rough sleepers by meeting their basic needs are still not there. Despite the fact that we now know that it is both possible and necessary. More and more necessary in fact, as with the cost of living crisis, homelessness is becoming a real possibility for more and more people.

*All names have been changed

Noticeboard

Fancy a run?

We still have **7 places** available for the ASICS 10K Central London run on Sunday 10th July.

If you would like to raise some funds for us and see the sights of central London (what more incentive do you need?)

please email

mail@mannasociety.org.uk

or

ring 020 7357 9363 – option 3

Van driver needed

We're looking for a van driver for our Harvest Festival collections. We normally pick up about 30 collections between mid-September and the end of October.

We're happy to look at someone working with us for the entire 6 weeks or on a come as needed basis.

If you are interested, please email

mail@mannasociety.org.uk

or

ring 020 7357 9363 – option 3

Dates for your diary

1. Our **online** AGM is on **Wednesday 21st September at 7pm**. If you would like to join us, please email mail@mannasociety.org.uk and we will send you the link needed to join.
2. Please come and join us for our **40th Anniversary service on 26th October at 6pm** here at the Manna Centre (more details at the end of Bandi's article – page 3). Please let us know if you are coming so we will have an idea of numbers. Many thanks.