

The Manna Society Newsletter Spring 2023

Working with homeless people & those in need

Disabled by a society in crisis

By

Eleanor Smith

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



When I read in the news yesterday that rough sleeping had risen 26% since last year, and 74% since 2010, I felt at least that my recent experiences had been validated. We have been extraordinarily busy in the Manna Centre recently. The cold weather since Christmas, and the increasing cost of living crisis have been taking their toll. People often ask me if I have noticed any trends in the kinds of people or situations that we have been working with in the advice service. It is a really difficult question to answer, as we see such a wide range of people in the advice office, in many different kinds of situations. However, when I really thought about it, what has been standing out to me is the number of elderly and disabled people we are seeing, which is really shocking. This is consistent with recent research by campaigning groups and think tanks, such as the Resolution Foundation, which found that disabled people on average are likely to be poorer, with less disposable income. A higher proportion of disabled than non-disabled people have reported cutting back on energy costs and struggling to keep their homes warm. The think tank reported that this was true even for disabled people who were in work, who were still earning less than their non-disabled peers.

Some of my most troubling cases involving elderly and disabled people; a severely autistic and physically disabled man, living in a property in which the damp was so bad that his several of his appliances rusted and broke. He approached us with his advocate for help with fundraising to replace these appliances. A man recently assessed by the Health Inclusion Team at The Manna, who was paralysed from the waist down and in a wheelchair, and who told the nurse that he was currently rough sleeping. My long term client 'Paul' who is in his late seventies and suffering with a range of health problems suddenly becoming street homeless, and being placed night be night in different hotels, as no longer-term temporary accommodation could be sourced by his local authority. Paul was grateful for the hotels but was not given the details of where he would be placed on any given day until the evening. At one point he was forced to ask a librarian at his local library to call the emergency out of hours team at 6pm in order to get details of his placement. My other long term client 'Victor', who is suffering from a range of life threatening health problems, including cancer and HIV, and who is currently living in a damp bedsit which is too small for any of the adaptations he is in need of.

The government has stated that it has tried to insulate the most vulnerable from the cost of living crisis through a raft of extra grants and discounts, such as cost of living payments for people on certain welfare benefits, the household support fund, and the warm homes discount scheme. However, I have been encountering a lot of problems in getting these payments to the most vulnerable. These have included at least two very vulnerable clients having their household support fund vouchers – which are posted to people, to be cashed at Post Offices – stolen from a communal mailbox. These people were living in accommodation with lots of problems with anti-social behaviour, living alongside troubled and desperate people. I have had other clients who have had a lot of difficulty receiving their warm homes discounts and are only now at the end of winter receiving their vouchers, having struggled through the colder months. This seems to be because the administration for the scheme has fallen onto the energy providers, whose administrative systems seem to be struggling to cope with the extra work. In one case, a merger between two energy companies left my disabled client 'Sam' in limbo as to who exactly his energy provider was. We spoke to no fewer than four different energy providers, passed from one to the other, which the accuracy of the information given dependent on the individual customer service agent. They have only now belatedly agreed to send Sam the vouchers. Another energy provider insisted it was my client's housing provider who was responsible for issuing the vouchers – this turned out to be incorrect. He too has also only recently received his vouchers, after a cold winter of worsening chest infections.

The social model of disability offers an understanding of disability in which, **though a person may suffer from health problems, or be physically or psychologically divergent from statistical norms, it is the structures of the society around them which actually disable them.** Being unwell or 'disabled' does not necessarily mean having a worse quality of life, because provisions exist to mitigate the impact of the health conditions themselves. They just need to be made available to people. However, my experience recently suggests that people with health problems and physical frailties are being left vulnerable to the hardships of life and are left with few resources to struggle through when times get tough, such as at the present moment. A one size fits all approach does not work. More thoughtfulness, care and understanding needs to be applied in ensuring that everyone can participate in society and live a full and fulfilling life.

N.B: Clients' names have been changed.



Rough sleeping on the rise again

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



Although the average daily numbers of people we cater for in our day centre have remained almost the same throughout the year 2022, [latest figures published by government](#) at the end of February this year tell a different story across England. Based on government figures, rough sleeping has risen by 26%, with a total of 3,069 people counted as sleeping rough in one single night when the snapshot survey was taken.

However, our own snapshot surveys we carried out in our day centre, both at the beginning and at the end of the year, indicate that the numbers of people coming to our day centre haven't changed much. On 23rd January 2022, we counted 115 people as using our services, whereas on 19th October 2022, the number was 117, (survey results can be found on our [website](#)). The difference in number is marginal. Based on these internal surveys, when rounded up, it's estimated that 30% of our service-users are in private rented accommodation. The days when people could rely on social housing are long gone, alas! 35% of our service-users sleep rough. 25% are either in hostels or temporary accommodation, and 10% stay with friends.

Detailed government statistics of rough sleeping started being collected since 2010. Every year, between 1st October and 30th November, local authorities, alongside outreach workers, local charities and community groups, carry out snapshot surveys of people sleeping rough, on a single night, across England. The results which government has now just published are based on these snapshot surveys, and they show that 3,069 people were counted as sleeping rough on these single nights the surveys were carried out. As already mentioned, they represent 26% increase on the number of people counted as sleeping rough in 2022.

Given this increase in rough sleeping, it's difficult to see how government will be able to meet its target of eradicating rough sleeping in England by 2024. The current cost of living crisis and the shortage of truly affordable housing make the prospects bleaker. It doesn't also help that a significant number of people among those sleeping rough have no chance of being accommodated because they've got no recourse to public funds. This is often due to their immigration status which prevents them from receiving housing assistance, and in some cases, even vital health assistance. They include some Europeans without a settled immigration status and some asylum seekers with an unsuccessful asylum claim.

In the midst of the current cost of living crisis, our advice-workers are continuing to find innovative ways to assist our service-users. Including, for instance, assisting service-users raise money to cover upfront costs which is necessary to pay for a deposit or rent in advance when renting a home privately. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, we're in the final stage of planning how money the Manna Society has put aside to meet the housing needs of our service-users can now be used to pay for upfront costs for some of our service-users who can live independently. But if I'm brutally honest, I've got to admit that unless the underlying causes of homelessness are addressed, we'd only be scraping the surface. As I see it, the lack of truly affordable housing

is the main problem which we need to tackle as a society, and building low cost social housing would enormously contribute to solving this problem.

Like for most, 2022 has been the year when we've properly operated without the severe restrictions which the Covid-19 pandemic imposed on us. We've been able to return to full capacity in terms of the services we've offered to our service-users comparable to the level of services before the pandemic. All our 6 services are running fully, consisting of food, shower facilities, clothing, welfare and housing advice, IT sessions, and healthcare. The service which hasn't returned is osteopathy. It was provided before the pandemic by the University College of Osteopathy.

We're particularly pleased that the Health Inclusion Team, part of the NHS, have now doubled their nurse clinics to twice per week – as opposed to once per week before the pandemic. They play an important role in preventing health conditions from deteriorating further and ensuring the wellbeing of our service-users. Similarly, we're very pleased that the START Team, still part of the NHS, who support and treat our service-users who experience mental ill health, have also doubled their capacity and are now coming once per week – as opposed to coming once fortnightly before the pandemic.

Unlike our Christmas dinner 2021, which I missed out on because I was ill with Covid-19, and had to spend Christmas in bed to recover, I was delighted that I was able to attend our Christmas dinner 2022, which we celebrated as usual with volunteers, long-time supporters, our service-users, and staff. As usual, we had two sittings. 50 service-users came to the first sitting, and 70 to the second. We all enjoy this Christmas party, and particularly for me, it's always the highlight of the year. Staff, volunteers, and supporters alike, work hard to make this dinner special, as we all wait on our seated guests, serving them food, and generously filling up their cups with drinks. Thanks to Better Bankside, one of our local business and community organisations network, our guests each left with a Christmas gift.



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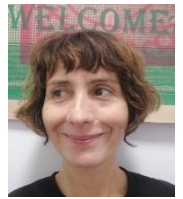


Some of the factors keeping people on the streets

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



Another year passed, another spring is approaching and again rough sleeping is on the rise in London.

Despite numerous past pledges from politicians and money being invested in prevention, homelessness does not go away or become significantly smaller. To be fair I do not think homelessness can be totally eradicated from society. People become homeless every day for all sorts of reasons and it is almost impossible to offer instant solution to everyone. It is particularly difficult for those who suffer from mental health problems, people who struggle with substance misuse and those who have no immigration status in the UK.

Why, despite all the efforts of statutory and non-statutory services are we unable to reduce these shameful numbers? Why is there an increase yet again? I will try to list some of the factors that come into play here. Please note that I am speaking here only from my personal experience so I may miss some factors or not be aware of the pressures other services may face. These are my observations of things that do not work well.

Prevention is failing:

We see people in our service, whose homelessness could be prevented. We also do a lot of successful prevention work at the Manna but sometimes people come to us when it is too late - when they are already homeless or due to be evicted. Like Samir, a 35 year old Somalian refugee, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. He has been recently evicted from his temporary accommodation as he accumulated rent arrears. He did so because he did not know that he had to make a housing benefit claim. Samir is a refugee, he suffers from mental health problems, English is not his first language and he does not understand the benefit system because he has just started his life in the UK. He was offered temporary accommodation by a local authority as they accepted their "duty to house" him due to his vulnerability. It was overlooked however that he clearly needed guidance and support to make a benefit claim. When it came to light, he already had a substantial amount of rent arrears and as a result, became homeless again. Samir in this article is a fictional person but sadly, his story represents the stories of many of our clients. These stories are extremely frustrating for us advisors – they show that despite enormous efforts of services one weak link in the chain of homeless assistance can move a person back to square one again.

Digital exclusion:

Covid has naturally sped up a digitalisation of statutory services. These days most of the main benefits are claimed online (Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction), supporting documents are uploaded online, and all correspondence goes via email. It is almost impossible to function without an email address as it is one of the obligatory fields for an online application.

It works great for those who are technologically savvy, those who have essential skills and access to the internet but that is unfortunately not the case for many of our customers. Our clients often struggle with it – some of them do not have smartphones, laptops, access to the internet nor the skills to use it. They do not use email or they keep forgetting their passwords, usernames etc. Often we have to create email addresses for our customers in order to progress other things, knowing that they may never use it by themselves. It creates a tricky situation as statutory bodies then assume they can communicate with the customer via this email, request additional information, documents etc. If the response is not received within a certain time it is often assumed that they do not wish to continue with their claims and this may lead to all sorts of problems including rent arrears, halted immigration applications and an inability to prove entitlement to housing costs. My clients often report feeling like they do not belong to society because they are unable to use the internet. In the last month, I have seen two European Union nationals whose application for Settled Status has been cancelled as they did not respond to emails from the Home Office within the allocated time given. Both of them had emails set up by immigration advisers for the purpose of their applications, but neither were able to use their emails on their own. Both were homeless with no regular access to the internet. When they came to see me, it was too late – we had to refer them to an immigration adviser again to start new applications.

I have also seen a young woman, an Ethiopian refugee, whose first claim for Universal Credit has been closed a week before she expected her first payment. It was closed only because she did not tick the little box “accept the claimant’s commitment” on her online Universal Credit account. As she had her appointment with her job coach a day before she came to me, she assumed that all was fine and she would receive her payment next week. When she came to us we discovered that her claim was closed and that she needed to put in a new claim and wait another 5 weeks for payment and housing - she was in tears. Luckily, we managed to find her a place in the homeless night shelter as her friends could not help her for another month. Again – this is not an isolated case.

I feel strongly that everyone should be given the option of a face-to-face appointment. By not doing so, we are excluding people who are quite capable of managing independently but run into difficulties as they are not IT literate.

Lack of affordable housing and austerity measures (bedroom tax and benefit cap):

This is self-explanatory. The quality of housing offered to vulnerable people has spiralled down while prices have gone up since I started to work for Manna. It is wrongly assumed that homeless people just need a roof over their head in order to move on with their lives. This is not true. People have pride and they want to live in decent conditions. We have instances of customers coming back to us because of rodent infestation; heating boiler broken down; cooker not working or because the electrics in their temporary accommodation is unsafe.

The introduction of the benefit cap and the bedroom tax has pushed many people into an impossible financial situation. We had a case of an older British woman, who almost got evicted from her property as a result of the bedroom tax regulations. As she lost her job, she was not able to cover the remaining rent and she started to accumulate rent arrears. She contacted her local authority to ask if they could help her move into a smaller property but was advised that it would only be possible once she cleared her outstanding balance. As she was on Universal Credit she could not afford to pay the debt nor her current rent. She was in a “catch22” situation. The arrears kept growing and she was threatened with eviction. Luckily, she got referred to a complex case officer from the council, who is assisting her in resolve this impossible situation.

Post Brexit complications regarding Settled Status for EU citizens:

Since the UK decided to leave the European Union the situation for EU citizens living in the UK has changed. They now must apply for settled or pre-settled status (EUSS) to be able to continue to live and work in the UK. In all fairness, applying for EUSS is a straightforward process if you are a “regular” person. You just need to have an email address, smartphone, ID and be able to prove your residency in the UK. If you worked, it is even better as the system automatically checks your National Insurance Number contribution so you do not need to back up your application with other documents. Unfortunately, it is not case for many of our people. They often do not use the internet, do not have a mobile phone or ID or they have a chaotic life where it is difficult to gather the evidence needed for their application. Others may have petty crimes which are being investigated by the police. This would also halt their EUSS application. We are working to help gather all the various proofs that they need; seeking grants so we can get our clients the correct ID they require etc. These things take a lot of time and in the meantime our clients are homeless with no income or a right to work.

Fancy raising money for us by running 10k through central London this summer?

The ASICS London 10K Run takes place on Sunday 9th July 2023.

Starting at Piccadilly & finishing on Whitehall

Passing St James Palace, Trafalgar Square,

St Paul’s Cathedral, Big Ben,

Westminster Abbey & Parliament Square.

If you feel up to the challenge and can raise a minimum of £200 we would be delighted to hear from you.

Please contact Paddy at mail@mannasociety.org.uk



A roof over your head

By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker



"Few things are more important for public well-being than a roof over your head, but mortgage rates are up, rents are rising, the stock of housing is stagnating and homelessness is rising."

Hansard – Cost of Living Debate – Public Well-being (20 October 2022) – Baroness Drake

Listening to the lunchtime news on the radio, it was reported that homelessness has increased by 26% in 2022 with charities reporting that rising prices are forcing people who would not have slept rough before onto the streets. This is the first reported increase since 2017. The new figures released by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities suggest the number of people sleeping rough is 35% lower than the peak in 2017 but 74% higher than in 2010.

Alongside the figures for rough sleepers, the Department also released figures for those who are considered as "Statutory Homeless" by local authorities which has shown a worrying trend in that temporary accommodation levels are continuing to grow – now standing at 99,270 households and a worrying trajectory is visible among households made homeless due to receiving what is known as a Section 21 notice – that is a no fault eviction which has grown by 34% on the previous year. The number of homeless households in temporary accommodation is, according to CRISIS, at its highest level in eighteen years.

Ending rough sleeping by 2024 – a realistic target

This target formed part of the Government's manifesto.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) published a report which had testimony from formerly homeless participants as well as organisations among others on how effort and resource could build toward such a target. Respondents fear the progress government has made towards this commitment since 2019 is at risk of being overwhelmed and lost, as the cost-of-living crisis we face worsens in the coming months.

There were 5 top recommendations, which were:

- a) Government should establish a new inter-ministerial working group or cabinet committee on homelessness and rough sleeping, as set out in the Kerslake Commission, to establish a clear vision and implementation plan for ending rough sleeping and, crucially, preventing and ending other forms of homelessness such as sofa surfing and those who are stuck in temporary accommodation.
- b) Government must urgently deliver improved access to genuinely affordable housing, to relieve the acute lack of accommodation options for people facing or experiencing homelessness.
- c) Government should strengthen preventative welfare policies to help more people keep their homes as the cost-of living crisis worsens and pushes people to the brink of destitution and homelessness.
- d) Government should urgently review existing criteria of priority need, intentionality and local connection in homelessness legislation in England, to ensure that people who are rough sleeping get the help they need.
- e) Government must ensure that the right support is available to sustain an end to someone's homelessness – particularly those with complex needs.

Underneath the recommendations were a series of practical suggestions

The working group

- a) Should be charged with publishing a cross-government national strategy. This would focus on identifying expectations of and engagement with key agencies.
- b) There should be a published annual review of performance, published no later than three months after the annual rough sleeping count.

- c) Establishing a Homelessness Prevention Taskforce which would define departmental outcomes.
- d) It was also acknowledged that a body be created to address the health inequalities among the homeless population and improve health outcomes.

Affordable Housing

- a) This is an issue we all know must be addressed and was recognised by contributing organisations as a “fundamental challenge”.
- b) Set the national target for building homes for social rent at 90,000 per year as per the recommended target.
- c) To assist this, increase the funding available through the Affordable Home programme. The programme provides grants to housing providers in England to support the cost of providing affordable homes.
- d) There is existing Government guidance to local authorities that exclude certain groups – one example would those escaping domestic violence. What this report suggests is that additional guidance is issued which extends the exemptions to specifically include people with a history of rough sleeping or at particular risk of rough sleeping.
- e) Consider further options in terms of rent incentives to encourage landlords to accept people in receipt of Housing Benefits or Universal Credit.
- f) That there is sufficient access to advice workers who can act as an interface between landlords and tenants – somewhere we come in.
- g) That the planned bill to secure abolitions of Section 21 evictions (the Renters Reform Bill) does go through in the current session of Parliament (which ends in May 23).

Strengthening Preventative Policies

- a) That there must be a review of how the Local Housing Allowance (the amount that is the maximum contribution to housing costs for Universal Credit/Housing Benefit claimants)
- b) That given the rate of inflation in all costs, the benefit cap (the limit on the total amount that an individual can claim – applicable to those over 16 but below pension age) should be reviewed to consider an exemption for those rough sleeping or stuck in temporary accommodation.
- c) Financial support should be sufficient to meet the rising financial pressure that the cost of living spiral is having on people – whether that is through the benefit system, cost of living payments, reductions in bills (energy) or reversing the cuts in the Discretionary Housing Payments – of course, it has been agreed that benefits will rise with inflation.
- d) That the deductions that are made to benefits are more tailored to the circumstances that people find themselves in and balance management of debt to enable them to cope with increased cost of living – perhaps being able to de-prioritise debts to the Government for a period. Currently up to 25% in total can be deducted from benefits to cover outstanding debts. The report also recommends that people are enabled to access token payment plans so that they can apply to their creditors for a period where nominal payments of £1 per creditor are levied until their financial situation improves – debt advice organisation such as Stepchange can help by administering the payments; thus, taking away some of the stress in managing debt – the scheme can be applied if there is belief that circumstances will change for the better over a 12 month period.

Reviewing the criteria for “priority need” in housing allocation

- a) The current tests for priority need does create gaps for those who are classified as “single homeless” and those who do not have dependent children and where individuals are “wanderers” in the sense that they move from area to area (not uncommon among rough sleepers) , they fail the test of proving that they have a local connection – in our borough – Southwark requires that you have a local connection of 5 years (and have done so continuously) to be eligible for the Housing Register.
- b) The Welsh Government undertook research in 2020 to review the priority need test (Review of Priority need in Wales – October 2020) and this centres upon the definition of vulnerability, where the local authority must consider if the person is significantly more vulnerable than an ordinary person would be if they were made homeless. In that study, participants reported that a high threshold for vulnerability

(was resulting in vulnerable people such as rough sleepers being excluded from being allocated interim accommodation and support) plus the test for vulnerability because it encouraged people to become yet more vulnerable in order to “earn” vulnerability. The report also found that the test was applied inconsistently.

- c) The same report also looked at the application of the local connection rules and participants were critical as it could be applied as a “gatekeeping” mechanism before any meaningful assistance could be given such as examination of the housing allocation policies, funds that could prevent homelessness and bond or rent deposit schemes.

The right support being available for people with multiple, entrenched needs.

- a) The Crisis Report – Homes for All reported that there was overwhelming evidence that for people with multiple and serious support needs, the traditional homelessness approaches of moving through different homeless accommodations to prove that they are “tenancy-ready” fails again and again – thus creating a problem of cyclical homelessness for this group leading to a return to the streets.
- b) The basic tenets of the “Housing First” scheme is that it provides rapid access to stable, ordinary housing from where there needs can be addressed and co-ordinated intensive support provided for as long as it is judged that it is required.
- c) Evaluations of the scheme show positive tenancy sustainment outcomes for the majority plus wider benefits such as health improvements and well-being and reduced demand on emergency health and criminal justice services – a “win-win” for the individual and for society as a whole.
- d) Analysis by Crisis shows that for every £1 invested in Housing First, £1.24 of savings are made due to reductions in the use of other homeless and related services.
- e) The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has recently published in September 2022 its third process report on Housing First from the three pilot areas. We are aware that Liverpool (one of the three pilot areas) has won further funding which will allow further investment in the scheme until at least 2025.

The definition of ending homelessness, according to Crisis and shared by such organisations as the Salvation Army which classifies rough sleeping as the most dangerous form of homelessness would be.

- No one sleeping rough.
- No one forced to live in transient or dangerous accommodation such as tents, squats and non-residential buildings.
- No one living in emergency accommodation such as shelters and hostels without a plan for rapid rehousing into affordable, secure and decent accommodation.
- No one homeless because of leaving a state institution such as prison or the care system.
- Everyone at immediate risk of homelessness gets the help they need to prevent it happening.

It is an absolute zero definition. The “Everyone In” initiative that ran during the pandemic is cited as initiating a seismic change in combating rough sleeping. When the average age of death among rough sleepers is 44 compared to the average life expectancy in England being c. 79 years, surely it is a moral duty to make that statistic a distant memory.

