

The Manna Society Newsletter

Christmas 2023

Working with homeless people & those in need

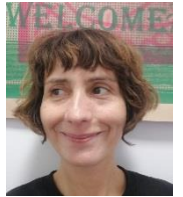


Refugee status - a time for relief, hope & joy?

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I am afraid I do not have good news for you this year. Sadly, this Christmas you will see an enormous increase in the amount of people who are rough sleeping in London and in other UK towns. Many of these people will be asylum seekers with newly granted refugee status. As many of you may be aware, the UK government has pledged to process all asylum application made before 28 of June 2022 by the end of this year. You could see this as a praiseworthy commitment until you actually understand that the government made no plans to deal with an increased demand for housing that this fast-tracking would create. Moreover the Home Office speeded up the 28-day move on period (period after which people have to leave asylum support accommodation once granted refugee status), leaving people with as little as seven days to move out.

As a result of this, both statutory and non-statutory homelessness services have experienced an unprecedented demand for assistance. According to the British Red Cross more than 50,000 refugees in the UK could be made homeless by the end of the year whilst no additional provision to house these people has been provided. It raises the question as to whether this was an intentional move to create a hostile environment for refugees or just a planning error by the Home Office? Time will show I suppose.

How does this affect the Manna Centre? From mid-August we began to see an increased number of refugees accessing our advice service; by the middle of October we were completely overwhelmed by the demand for housing assistance, and we had to take the difficult decision to suspend the drop-in service for new clients as it had become unsustainable. We had to admit that we had reached our capacity in regard to housing cases and now we needed a breathing space to research new housing options in order to meet the demand.



Photo by Pavel Danilyuk

This period, mid-August to mid-October, were deeply upsetting and disheartening months for me. I saw so many refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iran who were in absolute desperation. Some of my clients had letters showing that they had only been given seven days' notice to vacate their asylum support accommodation. Please understand that once an asylum seeker gets a document confirming their right to remain, they need to open a bank account and make a Universal Credit claim in order to apply for housing. It takes a full five weeks to get the first payment of Universal Credit and most housing providers will not accept a referral until the first payment of benefit is received.

Please also understand that refugees are people who are escaping violence and prosecution, people who are often traumatised by what has happened to them in their country or on their journey to safety. As Graham O'Neil, Scottish Refugee Council's policy officer said to the Guardian "The perversity of all this is that for those granted refugee status, this should be a time of relief, hope and joy; not of torment and homelessness,"

As I mentioned we faced unprecedented demand for housing assistance. People were so desperate that they were sleeping in front of our centre to be the first in the queue for our drop-in the following day. It was heart-breaking for me to see people waiting outside of Manna, with their sleeping bags, when I was leaving work at 4pm. That has never happened before in my career here.

I have seen people crying in my office as they felt so powerless and dehumanized by the system. I said I am sorry hundreds of times because I felt really sorry for this barbaric system they had to go through. I had a woman who told me she does not want to live any longer. She is an Ethiopian refugee, who was only 1 year in the country. Before she fled Ethiopia, the government killed her father and imprisoned her mother and her sister. Now, while her refugee status was granted, she has had to sleep outside, in the cold in London. She came to me hopeless and broken.

It is a crisis and sadly I suspect that this crisis will be used to divide us on the issue of refugees by our politicians. Please do not let them. Please do remember that if a politician deliberately creates a division within society, they are populists who do not care about that society at all. Please be kind to people who are sleeping outside. Acknowledge them, speak with them, and support them. Do not make them feel invisible. Thank you!

Merry Christmas



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A mixed blessing
By
Bandi Mbubi
Manna Centre Director



For all its glitz, Christmas is born out of adversity. It's the story of a seemingly ordinary young couple, with an unplanned pregnancy, on a long journey to Bethlehem where they take part in a census organised by the Roman occupying authorities. The young couple find themselves homeless and the heavily pregnant wife has to give birth in a manger. It's in the midst of this human adversity that the Joy of Christmas is born and can still be found today. When the noble pilgrims from the East visit Baby Jesus to pay him homage and celebrate with the young family, their visit disturbs the reigning King of Judea, Herod, so much so that he orders that all the babies in Bethlehem and in the surrounding areas be put to death, in the hope that this promised Messiah may be put to death too. Thus, in his infancy, Jesus finds himself not only homeless but also a refugee in Egypt, like his forefathers, in a foreign Land. The original Joy of Christmas comes cloaked in human adversity and suffering.

Christmas came early this year to many asylum-seekers. In an unprecedented move, the government granted asylum en masse to hundreds of asylum-seekers across the country within the same period of time. Being recognised as a refugee is of course welcome news as it allows refugees to start rebuilding their lives without fear of being sent back to countries they fled from. With their leave to remain, they can finally seek employment and begin to contribute to life in the UK. But unfortunately, for many refugees, being given newly granted asylum has also led to homelessness after being handed short notices to leave the National Support Service (NASS) accommodation they had occupied whilst waiting for a decision on their asylum application. In some cases, newly recognised refugees have had only two weeks to find accommodation, a difficult task for anyone, let alone a refugee with poor understanding of the system.

With the already existing housing crisis for the general population on welfare benefits and on low income, newly recognised refugees have struggled even more to secure accommodation at such short notice. Although we, at the Manna Centre, regularly work with refugees as part and parcel of our mission, the unprecedented number of refugees recently granted asylum who've turned to us has far exceeded our capacity to assist them all with their housing needs. For the month of September alone, out of 80 people who approached our housing and welfare advice workers, 50 were newly recognised refugees looking for accommodation – the bulk of whom came from local NASS accommodation. To make matters worse, it's also during this same period that we've been short-staffed with only two advice workers out of our usual team of three. With our newly recruited colleague, Chinasa Nnoka, we will once again operate at full capacity before the end of the year.

In the interim, we've had to stop taking any new cases, and we've focused our effort on clearing the backlog of existing cases. We're using the time to figure out more innovative ways to better support our service-users in finding accommodation. We're also reviewing our open access policy for our drop-in which is based on a first-come-first-served system. Although it's in line with our ethos of removing barriers and creating a welcoming and accepting environment, it has led some of our most desperate service-users to sleep rough outside our centre in the hope of improving their chances of being seen by our advice team. So, some nights, ten people, sometimes fifteen, would sleep on our doorstep in this way, in front of the centre. It often resulted in ten people, sometimes more, being sent away every day because we couldn't see them all in the advice office.

Overall numbers of people coming to us for food and the other services we offer have increased. We're more consistently exceeding 130 people per day compared to a little over 100 people per day previously. As we pursue short- and long-term solutions for our refugee service-users and our general population service-users, do please continue to support our work with them. Please also keep our service-users, our volunteers, trustees and staff in your thoughts and prayers so that the Joy of Christmas may shine through our current circumstances. It's in hardship that the Light of Jesus shines the brightest.

'Christmas is a season not only of rejoicing but of reflection.'

(Winston Churchill)



By

Margaret Shapland

Housing and Welfare Advice Worker

Are we still talking about the hostile environment?

There has been much coverage in the media with respect to the use of hotels for housing those who are awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. Latterly, there has been a significant increase in the number of evictions from accommodation of those with newly granted status.

Formerly, there had been a 28-day period before this group had to move on. In itself it was not really sufficient time for this group to set themselves up for independent living in the UK – for example, it takes five weeks on average for a claim for Universal credit to be processed. More recently, those with newly granted humanitarian protection have been receiving eviction notices requiring them to leave their accommodation in as little as nine – even seven days.

“Right to Remain” (an organisation who work with communities, groups and organisations across the UK to challenge injustice in the immigration and asylum system), has attributed this to a subtle shift in Home Office policy. This policy has been in operation since August 2023 but has been applied more strictly than has been the case in the past without adequate warning. Generally, if a person had section 95 support (Section 95 support includes housing **and/or** £47.39 allowance per week for each person in **self-catered** accommodation. For people in accommodation that is **catered** (food is provided), they receive £9.58 allowance per week) while they were waiting for an asylum decision. They remain entitled to it for 28 days after they receive a grant of refugee status, or for 21 days if their asylum claim is refused by the Home Office. This would seem to be an extension of what has become known as the “Hostile Environment”- essentially rather than easing and welcoming people into society, they are ending up at risk of homelessness.

Back in 2018, the Red Cross were concerned that even the twenty-eight days move on period often left people suffering extreme poverty and homelessness. They commissioned a cost-benefit analysis from the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) called “The Cost of Destitution”. The report concluded that giving refugees four additional weeks of support by extending the move-on period to 56 days could result in net annual benefits of between £4 million and £7 million to the UK. This includes £2.1 million to local authorities through decreasing the use of temporary accommodation, and up to £3.2 million through reducing rough sleeping.

This policy is affecting many parts of the UK as well as the capital. An article in the Birmingham Mail estimated that 1,000 refugees could be left homeless by Christmas this year in that area as a result of this policy.

I am sure my colleague will be letting you know that this has resulted in an enormous influx of people who have newly been granted status seeking assistance from our service.

Cost of Living and dealing with debt when you are vulnerable.

We all are aware that the cost-of-living exercises us all in attempting to manage income to meet outgoing costs. It becomes more so when there is the added vulnerability of poor mental health. Experiencing a mental health issue does not automatically mean that you are unable to manage your money or deal with your debts, but it can make it more difficult. The Royal College of Psychiatrists estimated that one in two adults with debts has a mental health problem. A 2023 survey by debt counsellors Christians Against Poverty found that 81% of those struggling with debt said it affected their mental wellbeing. Another 22% of the charity’s clients said that mental health issues caused their debt crisis.

Again, we are being approached by individuals who are struggling to deal with debt. Getting advice is the right path to get assistance though for many, it can be hard to make that first approach. For one thing, it means that information can be shared that can take away the immediate stress. I wonder how many know that under the Equality Act 2010 it says that if you have a mental health condition, your creditors must make “reasonable adjustments” to help you.

People can also apply for what is called “Breathing Space” whereby for 60 days, creditors covered by this scheme cannot contact you to ask for payment towards a debt that is included in your breathing space; cannot add interest or charges to a debt that is included in your breathing space; and must stop most enforcement action (such as court action or the use of bailiffs) for a debt that is included in your breathing space. If there are diagnosed mental health issues, “breathing space” can extend beyond 60 days if the person is receiving crisis treatment providing a longer grace period.

We have recently started this with a client of ours who had a number of debts including what are termed “priority debts” – such as council tax arrears, gas and electricity bills, phone or internet bills amongst others. A couple of these debts had been placed in the hands of collection companies, one of whom was about to send in bailiffs. We sat with the client and worked out a budget so we could see what financial leeway there was to make an offer to the creditors. We communicated with the local authority and obtained a stay of action regarding any outstanding council tax and obtained a “breathing space” to reduce the stress and anxiety that the client was clearly feeling. We are at the start of a journey with the client to give them greater confidence and help them to achieve an equilibrium so that money management is not a contributing factor to their mental ill-health.

We know that the festive period has an impact on the amount of debt people accumulate. Research by Lowell (credit management specialists) found that almost one in five (17%) questioned said it will take until Easter to pay off their Christmas debt, that’s a third of the year paying back what was spent over the festive period, with a further 21% taking two months to clear their debt and that is across the board. When you are looking at people who are vulnerable and on low incomes, then the pressures can be even more substantial.

It’s broke – we need to fix it.

Another subject that has been attracting a considerable amount of media attention is what is now referred to as “Britain’s Broken Housing Crisis” – our failure to provide enough homes for people to live in. We have spoken about this on a number of occasions. As an organisation, we seek to help our clients to find a home. We do as much as we can such as shaping a financial scheme to help pay the up-front costs for private rented properties. But we all know this must sit alongside bigger policy questions nationally. The Government Bill aimed at stopping “no fault evictions” has yet again been put on the “back burner”. We are out of step with our European cousins in the lack of protection afforded to those renting privately – at this time 4.6 million households. A recent Guardian article pointed out that countries like the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Germany and Denmark all have rules whereby they cap rents in certain locations, prohibit no-fault evictions and peg rent rises to inflation rates or local averages. English homes are on average now not just the smallest, but in the worst condition, and among the least affordable in Europe.

So, what options could be explored. Is it viable for the policy of “right to buy” to continue. **In just forty years, over two-thirds of council housing passed into private ownership.** It seems absurd that local authorities such as Islington are purchasing 310 ex-council homes (sold under the “right to buy” scheme) to help provide temporary accommodation. What has happened to building social housing homes? There is what Shelter call a “social housing deficit” where far fewer homes are being built as social housing compared with sales and demolitions. In general, fewer houses are being built and therefore, fewer affordable homes are being built and there is little direct funding from government geared to providing social housing.

Releasing funds in the right places – last year, The New Statesmen ran a headline “The UK now spends more on housing benefit than on most government departments”. Housing Benefit is estimated to have cost £23.4 billion

in the year with much going to the private sector in rents for temporary accommodation due to the shortage of social housing. If social housing stock could be grown, a significant amount of that expenditure could replenish public coffers and open up private rental opportunities.

More cost effective to demolish and re-build? A report by the Chartered Institute of Building published last year stated that currently, in the UK, renovation and retrofitting costs are subject to the standard 20% VAT, but demolition and new build is not. Often, that makes it more financially attractive to raze buildings to the ground than retain and upgrade them. Over 12 years, this has meant it has contributed to Great Britain knocking down or selling off 170,000 social rent homes than have been built.

I know our holiday season approaches, so would like to end on a little story about one of our clients. We were approached by a young woman from Syria who had just finished her education in the UK. During that time, she had applied for asylum but had not yet had the substantive asylum interview. Having completed her course, she would be homeless as the accommodation she had occupied was part of a bursary, which ended at the end of her course. We found her a hosting placement where for a period, she would be placed with a family. The student visa was still valid which allowed her to work within certain limitations. We sat down with her to explore certain areas of work that she would like to pursue – the most preferred being that of the refugee support sector. We provided lists of organisations, website etc which might help her in her employment search. She is a resilient, industrious and motivated person. Within weeks, she was offered a post in a refugee organisation and has started work. The organisation that employed her is supporting her with legal support to enable her to move from part-time work to full-time work in discussion with the Home Office. In addition to cover some short-term costs, we applied for a grant to cover travel costs and heard just this week that we had been successful.

I go back to the Red Cross report mentioned earlier in this article – if people were just given some breathing space, a very great deal can be achieved. We owe that to a group of people who have put their faith in the fairness and just nature of our country.

As an organisation, you dear reader help us to give that breathing space to the many clients we work with. We continue to be most grateful for your support. To finish, a few words from the inimitable Dr. Suess ‘

*‘Welcome, Christmas, bring your cheer.
Cheer to all Whos far and near.
Christmas Day is in our grasp.
So long as we have hands to clasp.
Christmas Day will always be just as long as
we have we.
Welcome, Christmas. While we stand.
Heart to heart... and hand in hand’.*

A joyous and peaceful Christmas to you all.

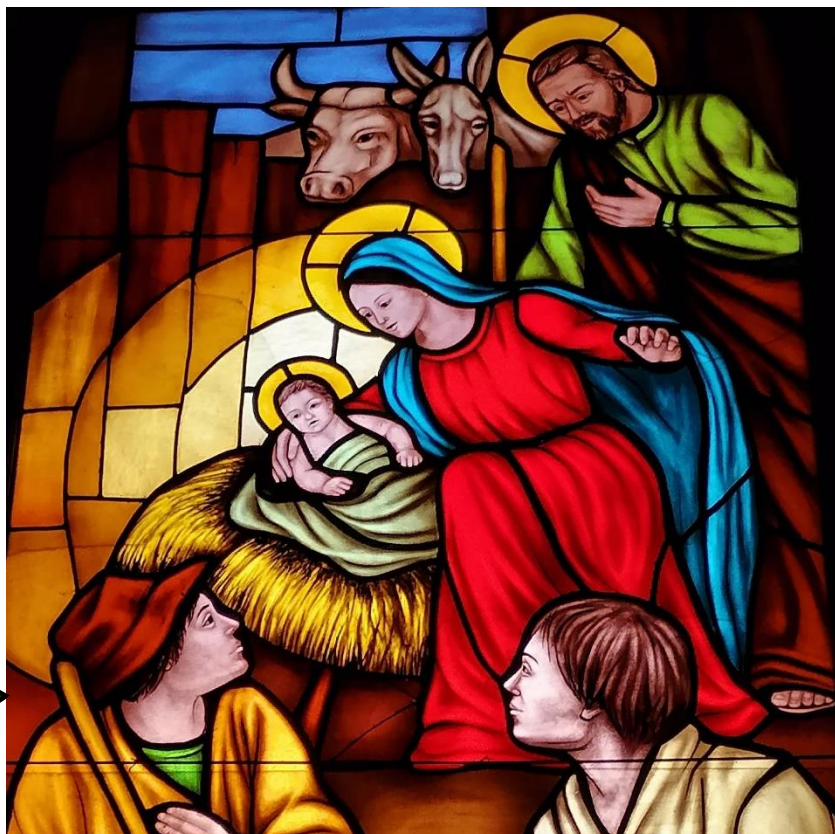


Photo by Carlos Roberto Córdova

**Would you like to help those in need this Christmas?
You can do so by providing us with any of the following:**

MOST NEEDED ITEMS

FOOD

Pasta
Pasta Sauces
Sugar
Baked beans
Fish (Tinned)
Tomatoes (tinned)
Vegetables (Tinned)
Basmati Rice
Tinned veg
Soup
Dilutable drinks
Corned beef
Chopped ham
Luncheon meats
Meat (Tinned)

MEN'S CLOTHING

Jeans (Waist 30-38)
Jogging bottoms
Underwear
Trainers

TOILETRIES

Bodywash
Deodorants
Shaving foam
Shampoo
Disposable Razors

MISCELLANEOUS

Sleeping bags
Rucksacks
Toilet Rolls
Tea Mugs
Novels
Oyster cards

Many thanks.

If you are like to save paper and help keep our postage costs down, you can do so by signing up for our electronic newsletter via our website. If you choose to do so, please email me on mail@manna.org.uk so that I can take you off our mailing list.

Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2023

Although we have the equivalent of 6 months running costs in our reserves, our expenses have increased by £42,000 in the first six months of this financial year, compared to this time last year. This is largely due to salaries increases and the high cost of utilities, especially our electricity costs. **Our monthly expenditure has risen from £40,000 to approx. £45,000. For the first six months of 23-24 our expenditure has outstripped our income by £75,000.**

You can help us address this deficit in a number of ways:

- By a one-off donation, either directly into our bank account (bank account details below):
 - Account Name: The Manna Society reg Charity 294691
 - Account Number: 50109537
 - Sort Code: 08-9299
- or by sending a cheque to The Manna Society, 12 Melior Street, London SE1 3QP.
- or via the 'Donate' button on our website- <https://cafdonate.cafonline.org/7580#!/DonationDetails>

If you would like to **support our work on a more long-term basis** you could consider:

- setting up a regular donation via standing order (currently about 14% of our income comes via this method) – please ask us for a Standing Order form.
- leaving us a legacy in your Will (over the last number of years legacies have been crucial in supporting our work)

If you are a taxpayer and would like to increase your donation by an additional 25%, at no extra expense to yourself, please consider Gift-Aiding your donation. On average (over the last 4 years), we have received an additional £15,000 per year approx. thanks to Gift-Aided donations.

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: _____