

The Manna Society Newsletter

Christmas 2025

Working with homeless people & those in need





Winds of Change

By

Karolina Muszynska

Interim Director



I have been working for The Manna Society as an advice worker for over 15 years, and I have to admit that I was planning to move on next year, as I felt it was time for a change and a new challenge. However, it seems the Universe had different plans for me, instead, I have been promoted to the role of Interim Director of the Society. This all happened quite unexpectedly, following the departure of our previous Director, Bandi, who served for over two decades and left big shoes to fill.

It is one of those twists in life that I could never have predicted, but when it happened, I felt that perhaps this was the *change and challenge* I had been looking for. Interestingly, it almost felt meant to be, I experienced several meaningful closures in my advice work cases. One of our long-term clients, a very vulnerable man in his thirties who came to us a few years ago with literally nothing, no ID, no income, and no memory of how he got to us due to severe mental health issues was finally granted immigration status and is moving into a care home next week. Another client, whom I called *Alice* in one of my previous articles, has finally been granted Pension Credit and Housing Benefit. It was a long and frustrating battle, and I am very happy that she has finally received what she deserves and can now focus on addressing her health issues.

It's always a good feeling when you're able to close things before a big transition, it makes the change smoother. I had a mix of emotions when I was offered the new role: from feeling very excited (like before a new adventure) to feeling overwhelmed and self-doubting. Among all that, I also felt sadness, I was grieving my work with clients. I loved my work with people; I learned a lot, it shaped my life, and it contributed to my personal growth. But more than that, I had built real connections with many of my long-term clients. We chatted, joked, and became friendly with one another. It wasn't easy to let all that go. In my new role, I am still looking after people, but now it's more about *looking after the people who look after people*.

Now, over two months into the role, I'm slowly getting comfortable in my new skin. My perspective on the work of The Manna Society has broadened, I now see how we fit into the wider network of organisations, and I can confidently say that we offer a strong, practical service with a dedicated, down-to-earth team of staff and volunteers. Our work is practical, real, and rooted in love. I've always felt that our ethos is very much alive: we are here to love people, not to judge them. It's exactly what Nannette wanted it to be — open to everyone in need.

We offer a reliable service to people, available seven days a week, almost all year round (except for nine days 4 for cleaning and 5 for Christmas). We are free and open to all, we do not gatekeep or ask intrusive questions. We do not put conditions on people or expect anything in return. We are also conscious of where our money comes from: we do not accept funding from companies involved in the arms trade, alcohol, gambling, or drugs. And we would never accept funding from any grant provider who tries to impose conditions that go against our ethos.

It is truly an honour to be appointed as the Interim Director and to continue the work started by Nannette Ffrench in 1982. The more I reflect, the more I see what an amazing person she is and how she made the impossible possible. I promise to continue the good work and take good care of our team, our volunteers, and all our supporters. I am also delighted to inform you that we have a new member in our advice team, Abbie Brooks. Abbie will be leading the advice service, and you can read her first piece in this newsletter.

Merry
Christmas

Do you fancy seeing London in a different light whilst raising funds for us?



On the evening of Friday 20th March 2026, 24 homelessness charities are taking part in the London Walk, the only event that brings charities working in homelessness together. Every step powering the journey towards brighter tomorrows.

There will be three routes available: a 10K, half marathon and marathon through Central London. Starting and finishing at The Connection St Martin's in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square. Walking through the night offers an opportunity for reflection on the experience of people who are

homeless. Not just people who are forced to sleep on the streets but those who walk through the night, travel on night buses or access 24 hour retail sites in order to stay awake and stay safe. In particular young people, trans people and women, who are all especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

For the 10k registration starts at 7pm and the walk will leave at 8pm. Walkers doing the half or full marathon will then register from 8.15pm and the walk will leave at 9pm. Approximate finish times for the walks are as follows: 10k – 10pm, half marathon – 1am, marathon – 5am.

Key info:

- Event takes place Friday 20th March 2026, 7pm
- Distances are 10k, half marathon, marathon
- Places are £100 per person (charity pays)
- Sponsorship targets are £200, £300 and £400 respectively
- Registration is £40 per person (walker pays)

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If this sounds like something you would be interested in doing, please email Paddy at

mail@mannasociety.org.uk

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Registered Charity No: 294691

We are very grateful to:

The Maudsley Charity for their £30,000 grant



**Backing
Better
Mental
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The London Borough of Southwark for their £61,604 grant

funded by





A Beacon of Hope with Boundaries

By

Chinasa Nnoka

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



Manna has a strap line “Working with Homeless People and those in Need” I’ve worked as a Housing and Welfare Adviser for almost two years and seen first- hand how Manna lives up to this statement. Charities, by virtue of being called such, have a spoken or unspoken ethos of reaching out and helping those who might otherwise be neglected. Knowledge of their reputation is spread via advertising, official recommendation or word of mouth and like Manna much of the provision is from private donations and it is prudent to be a good steward of these gifts. I find that fact is stranger than fiction and sometimes the situations people find themselves in might warrant a little extra help.

Recently I interviewed a young woman who did not fit the profile of our regular service users, she was accommodated for a start. She informed me that she had trained for a profession, had found it difficult to get work, then began to give her skills for free. This had secured some sporadic contract work but incurred unexpected costs, such as travelling to various destinations. She had now registered for benefits, but said she had no food, nor had she eaten in a few days and she had contacted Manna in desperation. When I gave her £20 in Aldi vouchers, her face was a mixture of disbelief and gratitude. I later gave her a food voucher and details of places where she might be able to eat for free. A couple of days later I received a card from her with a lengthy message of thanks. She indicated that she would like to volunteer here which is another aspect that I like about Manna and charities like it.

Transformation

When I was volunteering with the homeless nearly twenty years ago, I visited a Homeless day Centre now closed and marveled at the fact that former service users were serving as volunteer staff. Working at the Manna I have seen this close-up also. There’s one chap whom I interviewed shortly after I joined two years ago. He seemed traumatized, his statements were vague, and his situation as presented gave me little opportunity to help him. He never returned for advice, but he was a regular at the Centre; gradually I saw him speaking to more of the service users, seeming to gain confidence, until one day I saw him volunteering. He has continued this and now seems to have a spring in his step and a sense of purpose, I notice he is diligent and enthusiastic about his duties, these seem to have given him focus and direction and certainly if he ever requires a reference for work, I anticipate that the reference will be a glowing one! I thank God for the transformative potential of Manna because there are similar stories amongst those who volunteer with this organisation.

The Safe Warm Space

When I started working at Manna the set up reminded me of either “East Enders” or “Coronation Street” in that there is a public that come in for food, (non- alcoholic) drink, showers and other things largely administered by the staff behind the serving area. There are what I call “regulars” amongst the service users. When I had my induction and worked at the Servery for a time it was like, “Oh his is a black coffee, no sugar”. Coming into work, as I walk through to get my key, there’ll be a chorus of greetings; ‘Hello’, A’right Miss” from those whom I have helped and others who have become accustomed to my face. I find this uplifting every time.

Curious, I asked one regular what kept him coming back to the Centre. I had a feeling I knew, but his response confirmed that it was a space where he felt safe. Our capable Servery staff know how to strike the balance between keeping order and making customers feel welcome. Additionally, our service users can get hot meals for free, which is such a blessing, particularly in harsh economic times like this.

At least three people whom I have spoken to (who were already housed) tell me they value the meals particularly and for some the showers are appreciated because they have hit a particularly difficult patch and found the utility bills hard to manage. One other said she came for purely social reasons. Sadly, this last lady has not been seen recently, I understood that she had a spell in hospital. I notice also a type of community is formed when staff, myself included, will note that we have not seen a particular person for a while or receive a sad often informal notification that one of the service users has passed on.

Generosity runs through Manna's veins, but there are occasions when I have found it distinctly necessary to draw the line and refuse simply because some of our clients are taking advantage and there is a need to protect the resources and stop others from repeating this.

Mr A arrived and asked to be given money to apply for a Passport, he seemed edgy and told me it was an emergency. I explained that I could not do this, but I could support the application and try to source funds. He made it clear he would have preferred cash but eventually submitted to our procedures. He told me that he had no mobile phone, as there were two donated phones available, I gave him one. A week later he returned to say that it had been stolen. As this happens regularly with our homeless clientele, I gave him the benefit of the doubt and issued another. A week later he asked for another phone telling me in a very deadpan way that the last one had been stolen. We had run out of donated phones by then, but I told him that he had had his lot, particularly as he was adept at using his email account. Months later, I was completing a benefit application with him and a phone would have been useful, although a new batch had arrived at Manna, I did not offer one because his previous behaviour did not inspire the confidence to do so. We also decided here that our service user shouldn't be given a replacement phone if we have given them one in the last nine months to one year.

Another client, whom I'll call Malcom, displayed signs of extreme vulnerability, he was continuously wringing his hands, jumping at loud noises such as a door closing, he complained that he could not be around crowds, so he claimed found it difficult to come to Manna and be amongst the service users. We needed to have some ID for him to access a benefit, and he went to extraordinary lengths to withhold this information arguing that he had researched this and Manna didn't need this from him. I noticed that his vulnerable and lowly presentation vacated temporarily, whilst he strenuously and heatedly argued his case adding that Manna was causing him distress. Incidentally, he received almost £100 shopping vouchers, clothing, footwear (I had bought some things privately pitying his situation, but we'll leave that one alone, eh?!). We tried negotiation: produce the ID but Manna will not keep a record of it- he refused this offer. Eventually we decided that we could not support him to get the service he wanted (on his terms) and he became very rude. I believe Manna's decision was right, a Charity should empower where possible but selectively choose **not** to enable where clients refuse to comply with procedures for spurious reasons.

Recently, Manna added a criterion, for people seeking housing assistance, they must have been living in London for six months to qualify for housing assistance (this does not apply to the other services which Manna offers). Prior to this "ruling" the phone would ring off the hook during the period allocated to homeless clients seeking an appointment. Most of the callers were newly recognised refugees, who were under 35 and seeking to be housed near their communities, mainly in London. However, in common with all housing organisations, we have found that there is a real scarcity of available housing for under 35s who do not fit the "priority need" category.

As a result of the six-month ruling, the number of telephone calls seeking housing appointments on a Friday morning have decreased, freeing the time and space to deal with other issues, support to apply for a replacement Bus Pass or a benefit query for example. The calls are increasing now as the processing times for Asylum claims have shortened further. We do as much as we can to alleviate the hardships faced by our clients and by staying true to that mission, we hope to be a beacon of hope for those who might otherwise be without it.

Emmanuel in the Shadows

*In quiet streets where cold winds moan,
Where hearts feel heavy, and tears are sown,
A humble light still softly glows,
For God walks with the ones who know.
In broken homes, in lonely nights,
Amid the fear, the grief, the fights,
The angels' song still whispers near:
"Do not despair, I am right here."
The manger holds a promise true,
A King who bore our sorrows too.
Not just for joy, not just for cheer,
But for the aching, the lost, the seared.
He comes to those to whom sorrow clings,
With quiet strength and tender care.
Through pain and shadow, dark and deep,
He watches close, and loves, and keeps.
So when the world feels cold and dim,
And hope seems faint, and prayers grow thin,
Remember: Emmanuel is born to be
A light in suffering, Christ with thee.*

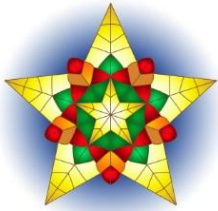
Anon



*'But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement'
W B Yeats*



Christmas 2024 – staff & volunteers having a well-earned break after serving 140 Christmas dinners



Old reflections for a new beginning

By

Abbie Brooks

Senior Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I joined the Manna Society team in September this year, and as such this is my first time writing for the newsletter. I have joined the team as the Senior Advice Worker, following Margaret retiring in the summer. She had been in post for many years, and she has definitely left me big shoes to fill. Coincidentally our director Bandi also left his post this summer, and Karolina has stepped up to his position, bringing even more new starts with the beginning of the academic year.

As is common in starting a new role, I feel that the first few weeks have been a bit of a blur of information, faces and tasks. Only upon writing this have I started to reflect on my how I am settling into Manna, and how Manna is settling on me.

Most of my working life has been spent in charities of one kind or another. However, my last role was working in Homelessness support with a London Council, and it does feel good to be back 'home' with Manna.

What I really enjoy about working for charities, is that my colleagues have made a conscious decision to go into a line of work that fundamentally helps others. Whilst there are countless jobs that do 'help', I feel that charity workers are some of the most self-selecting in this aim, we have felt the same call.

The sense of a workplace can be picked up on quickly. It's not just in its the written ethos, or mission statement. It is innate and is fundamentally created by its people. There is no doubt that Manna is made by its people. I was shocked when I started, to discover that the average time that staff (including volunteers) have been in post is between 15-20 years! This stood out to me immediately – this is a place people do not want to leave. It has also created a real community, the relationships between service users and staff are strong, and massively aid the harmony of the day to day in the centre. I am proud to have joined this well-oiled team.

This is not to say that I have found the role without challenges. The role of an advice or support worker is in many ways a strange one. No two days are the same, and unexpected obstacles to progress can come thick and fast. A classic example that we encounter almost weekly is the endless vicious cycle of how to support clients to open a bank account without ID, how to obtain ID without funds, how to claim benefits without a bank account. (Spoiler: the answer is bureaucracy and paperwork).

I remember being told by a colleague in my first frontline role, that sometimes there is a difficult disconnect when talking to friends and acquaintances about support work. When doing so, I am often told that my work must be 'rewarding'. Whilst in some ways true, I feel that this is a common misconception about the reality of frontline work. Often, it is not 'rewarding' at all.

London's endemic housing shortage, compounded by the cost-of-living crisis, has hit its vulnerable the hardest. The struggle to support this group, is nearly always uphill and is rarely rewarded with neat, satisfying results. If the 'reward' is not in making steady, linear progress, then where is it?

I would counter this idea of 'rewarding' work, with the sense of being useful. There have been few days at Manna when I have been able to achieve everything I want for our clients. We cannot find perfect solutions for all who come to us. But there has not been a day when I have not felt useful. Whether this has been in supporting colleagues, slowly chipping away at a client's goal, or simply providing emotional support when breaking bad news, I feel that I have a real purpose each morning I come to work. For this, and so much else, I am very proud to have joined the Manna team.

Manna Centre - Christmas Appeal 2025

It costs approx. £48,000 a month to run the Manna Centre. The work we do here is a compassionate response to homelessness and poverty. We are dependent on the goodwill of our supporters for our continued existence.



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

or

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

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

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

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

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

I would like to donate £ _____ to the Manna Centre. (Cheques payable to "The Manna Society Reg Charity 294691")

Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____

Email address: _____

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

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Standing Order Form

Name and Address of your Bank/Building Society;

To the Manager of _____ Bank/Building Society

Address: _____

Post Code: _____

Instruction to your Bank/Building Society Manager:

Please pay into the account of 'The Manna Society Reg Charity 294691' – Co-operative Bank plc Account No. 50109537, Sort Code 08-92-99,

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

Commencing on (date) _____

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

On _____ (date of month)

Until further notice, charging the same to my account:

Name _____ (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signature _____

Address _____

Post Code _____

Bank/Building Society Details:

Account Name:.....

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

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

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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