

# *The Manna Society Newsletter*

## *Spring 2025*

*Working with homeless people & those in need*



***Heartfelt thanks to our colleague, Margaret Shapland, who is retiring in March 2025 after over 20 years of dedicated service. Her contributions to the Manna Society have been deeply valued by clients, staff, volunteers, and trustees, and we're forever indebted to her. With her brilliant intellect, resourcefulness, and strong work ethic, she has gone above and beyond the call of duty - both in assisting our service users and in shaping how we run our services. We're grateful that, even in retirement, she plans to stay involved and explore new ways to support us.***

**So long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, goodbye!**

**By**

**Margaret Shapland**

**Senior Housing and Welfare Advice Worker**

*"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard." – A.A. Milne (Winnie-the-Pooh)*

I have to tell you, dear reader, I am about to embark on that great journey called retirement. After twenty-two years as part of the Manna Society, I leave officially as an employee. I am writing on the very day that the new figures on rough sleeping are announced – with an increase of 20% in a year and that increase has been seen for the third year running, with London and the South- East accounting for 45% of the total numbers. Rough sleeping is, of course, an extreme representation of the level of poverty in the UK. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported in January 2025 that more than 1 in 5 people (14.3 million) were in poverty in 2022/23.

It hurts to read that over almost my entire tenure at the Manna Society poverty levels have seldom fallen. Joseph Rowntree's Foundation report – UK Poverty 2025 – tell us 4 in 10 of those classified as being in poverty are actually falling under the definition of being in deep poverty. Such poverty places people on a cliff-edge – it would not take much for things to deteriorate to put them in extremis. In October 2024, around 2.6 million of the poorest fifth of households (44%) were in arrears with their household bills or behind on scheduled lending repayments, 4.1 million households (69%) were going without essentials and 3.2 million households (54%) cut back on food or went hungry.

What we have to believe in is that tides can turn – of course, policy changes, economic growth can all have a positive impact on such a picture but I sincerely believe that pursuing an ethos that has consistency and real focus and does not have a quick win philosophy (though we'll take it if it comes our way) but instead works patiently to make people's lives better marks out organisations such as ours. So....

## **Let me tell you a story**

We first met Mairead back in 2018 – originally working with a much-missed colleague. She approached our service as she had had to leave previous accommodation due to the behaviour of the other residents. To put this in context, Mairead has had a traumatic back history arising from emotional abuse within the family and sexual assault, resulting in a diagnosis of complex Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. She had come through a period of substance abuse directly related to the trauma experienced. Our long-term aim from the “get-go” was to get to the point where she had permanent accommodation - “a home of her own”.

Necessarily in the current housing climate, this was not immediately achievable but was always front and centre of our minds and mindful of the impacts of her diagnosis as quite often, she experienced flashbacks triggered by certain interactions, it was very clear that she needed self-contained accommodation to provide a safe space.

Following spells in private rented accommodation which as we know in many cases do not provide the security that many persons are looking for, she was reduced to sleeping rough. We assisted her to get in touch with the relevant outreach team, who were able to verify Mairead as a rough sleeper. This led to a two pronged pathway with a homelessness application being made to the local authority and an application to an organisation called Clearing House. Clearing House provides medium term self-contained housing to people known to have slept rough. As Mairead had been previously known to rough sleep, we were able to make a successful application and she joined the waiting list.

At the same time, we pursued the homelessness application and after a period in temporary accommodation, the decision was made that she was indeed found to be in “priority need” which mean that the local authority concerned recognised a duty to house her on a permanent basis. She was able to access the local authority housing register to bid for a suitable property.

Having secured a property and moved in, another dilemma arose. Regrettably Mairead’s next-door neighbour manifested quite extreme anti-social behaviour – had already been subject to court action but was breaching the conditions of the court ruling and it transpired that the previous tenant of Mairead’s property had had to move as a result of that behaviour. It was touch and go as to whether Mairead would be able to remain in the property.

Supporting Mairead, a complaint was registered – both the local authority and the housing association where Mairead was being housed agreed to a managed transfer and to re-open Mairead’s place on the housing register to enable her to bid again. In the meanwhile, the housing association decided to reopen the court case. She is a determined lady and despite these disruptions, she has decided to stay as she says – this is the first real home I can call my own and I am not going to give it up.

Over time alongside the advice support, we have been able to help out financially, supporting her with travel costs, food vouchers from our Aldi voucher bank (contributed by St James Church Weybridge who have supported us over the years), help with furnishings for her new property including a donated washing machine and more recently, we made a number of applications to various grant providers to get enough funds to fund carpeting throughout the property – so it feels more like a home.

When I told her of my retirement, we reflected on the journey she and our organisation had taken together. This is just one instance of what happens every day in our day centre. We have lived with our clients through points in their lives which are extremely stressful, totally precarious and with our help have come through and, in some instances, made a new life or at the very least have been able to improve their circumstances. That said, it is not only our efforts but those of our clients who are resilient, willing to take advice and act on it and reclaim their lives – it is inspirational to just be a part of this.

*'Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success'.* — Henry Ford  
Any one of my colleagues would be able to tell you many stories such as that described above and I want to pay tribute to all of our staff for the enormous care and compassion they show in guiding people through the mazes of bureaucracy, negotiating with partners and providers and supporting people at some of the most stressful periods in their lives.

That care has become even more apparent as our client base changes over time and access to other services that might be able to help them becomes more difficult. We know we are working with people who are more than ever affected by mental ill health. The case study above is one illustration. A recent Health Audit report looking at findings over three waves of homeless respondents found that the number of people with a mental health diagnosis has increased substantially from 45% (1005) of respondents in wave 1 to 82% (401) in wave 3. Furthermore, 72% (291) of respondents reported experiencing depression, compared to a national rate of 10% pre-pandemic and that 45% (211) of respondents self-medicate with drugs or alcohol to help them cope with their mental health. Using the GP Survey 2021 as a national population comparison, we can see that 12% of respondents reported having a mental health condition in 2022, a difference of 70 percentage points emphasising the harsh health inequalities that this cohort exhibit. What I also notice is that staff are happy to deal with the smallest concern or request. For a person who may be feeling marginalised, recognition can be everything.

We also know that we have an aging population – it is both a testament to the fact that many of our clients have in some way “grown up” alongside us and to their faith in our service. Over the last quarter, they accounted for nearly 20% of our clients (over 55s). We have an open door policy where anyone who is over 18 can access our service – there is no upper age limit. With many within this cohort, our job has been to help them make that transition – if there is a need for sheltered housing, making sure they get advice as they approach pension age from Government agencies and making applications for State Pension and Pension Credit particularly needed to secure Winter Fuel Allowances.

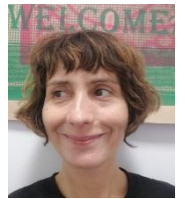
At the other end of the age spectrum, we have seen a substantial increase in the number of our clients who are under 35, accounting for 48% of clients in the last quarter largely needing help with accommodation and many of them newly recognised refugees. It is a bewildering landscape for a young person who is not familiar with UK systems, struggling to communicate if they have not had the chance to become comfortable in using the language of their new home. Most are keen to learn to improve themselves as well as finding work in the UK. There is no doubt that it is a challenge to find accommodation for this groups as new legislation has reduced their access to what is known as supported accommodation. We know that youth homelessness is still on the rise in London recent research stating rises of 10% in the numbers of young people sleeping rough.

I remember being asked how we helped people who approached us and I felt that our response should have that optimism that keeps us all going – as far as I am concerned, for those who are homeless who come to us, our job is to provide that safe haven that allows them to grow as a person so that they can be someone who feels able to make a contribution to society. For those who have accommodation and need our help –that help can provide the security for that person in terms of their accommodation, their incomes, their budgets and that little bit of help that can help them get over a very temporary rough period.

The people who support us are so integral to the delivery of our service, it would be impossible for us to do this without you – my heartfelt thanks for the all the hard work you have done over the years to allow us to continue to be here. Challenges will continue but we know our readers “have our backs” and that is cause for great optimism.

Time to sign off – I wish you all good health and that life gives you what you need to live your best life.

**Step by step**  
**By**  
**Karolina Muszynska**  
**Housing & Welfare Advice Worker**



It's a hard task to write something positive in the current climate, but I will try. Spring is approaching, the days are getting longer, the weather is milder. We need some optimism. I often find myself complaining about the lack of resources, affordable housing, digital exclusion, poor decision-making by statutory services, etc. Dealing with systemic injustice is a difficult and draining part of this work. However, there are joys too in this work - our little successes in helping our customers and their gratitude. It can be very rewarding when you help someone achieve their goal and they show their appreciation.

There are customers with whom we've been working with for long periods, and it is really good to see the progress that has been made over the months/years. With small steps and often several setbacks along the way.

K. has been known to us for over 10 years. I noticed him in the centre a few years ago, but he did not approach me for help until July last year. He is an EU migrant who has been living in the UK for 15 years now. He is a very friendly person and has some mild issues with gambling and substance misuse. He approached me one day last year and asked if I could help someone who had nothing. By that, he meant no document that serves as ID, no immigration status, a lost National Insurance Number, no bank account, etc. I told him I had seen worse and invited him to put his name on the 'drop-in' list so we could start addressing his issues. It transpired that what prompted him to seek help was the illness of his mother, who lives in his country of origin. He had not seen her in 10 years, and he really wanted to go home to visit her.

We had to start by raising money for his passport replacement, which took a month. Once we had the funds, we booked an appointment with the consulate and had to wait for them to issue his ID. That took another few months, but finally, it arrived. We agreed it would be best to keep his document in our safe so it would not get lost. In the meantime, I wrote to HMRC, trying to establish his National Insurance Number (NINO). K. worked on a cash-in-hand basis and lost his NINO and documents a long time ago while living on the street. HMRC responded to my letter, stating that they required a copy of his ID to confirm his NINO. We had to wait for his passport to arrive. Once it did, we repeated the request, and his NINO was confirmed.

The next step was to apply for Settled Status. As I mentioned, the client is from an EU country and missed the deadline (30/06/21) for the European Settlement Scheme. He could still make a late application but would need to prove not only that he had reasonable grounds for the delay in applying but also that he had been continuously resident in the UK. We decided that the best course of action would be to refer him for expert advice via Eastern European Resource Centre (EERC). Having dealt with similar cases in the past, I already knew we would first need to gather evidence of his residence before they could take the case on. We embarked on the journey going down memory lane with K, trying to find official documents that would confirm his continuous residence here for a period of five years.

K. felt overwhelmed. He said that he had nothing to prove it – no employment history, no bank account. But as we dug deeper, it turned out that he was known to a few services, and they agreed to write letters in support of him. We added a letter from us. He also remembered that when he first came to the UK, he worked in registered employment for two years. We managed to retrieve this information from the tax records. It also turned out that he had lived in rented accommodation for four years and was named on the Council Tax bill. I have written to one London Council today to ask for confirmation of this, and I am awaiting their response. If that is successful, I think he has a good chance of securing Settled Status and being able to visit his mother.

An Immigration Adviser from EERC has already accepted his case and is eager to start his application in March 2025. I had an appointment with K to set up his UKVI (UK Visas and Immigration) account and to verify his identity. It is a long journey, and we still haven't reached our goal, but since July, we have made amazing progress, and I am very hopeful that he will soon be able to reunite with his mother.

# Moving towards the era of the faceless bureaucrat

By

Chinasa Nnoka

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



I think that as a consequence of a number of factors, clients of frontline services - housing being a prime example, are moving inexorably towards the era of the faceless bureaucrat. This is not a criticism of any particular organization but my observation of a trend which creates an even greater need for charities like Manna which have agility and flexibility.

## ***Spending cuts***

Councils spent 42% less on services in 2022-23 than if spending had kept pace with cost and demand pressures since 2010-11, according to new analysis carried out by The Local Government Association. Records show that during the 2019-2024 Parliament funding for councils was increased by 7.5 million (*Changing the local Government Financial System Institute for Fiscal Studies*). Despite the financial injection boost I don't think clients /customers see or feel the benefit of this increase in ways which they would find useful.

The Homelessness Reduction Act (HRA) of 2017 mandates local authorities to offer a service to all who approach as homeless, though not all will receive housing, there should be casework and a written decision, so the officer's workloads have increased. One result is a common complaint that I hear from clients: they cannot contact their case workers.

I tried calling one client's caseworker on his direct line, about six occasions in her presence, each time my call went to voicemail. The case worker and I had been colleague years ago; he recognised my name in the email that I had eventually sent and called me. I asked why he had never answered or returned the calls that both the client and myself had made. His reply was 'because I am on duty three times a week and then have to write up the legally required, Personal Housing Plans for each client'. I could appreciate that he wouldn't have much time for calls.

## ***The digitalization of services***

Another offshoot of the HRA Act is the introduction of these Locata or online reporting systems for homelessness. A client asked for support as had tried and failed to join his local authority's Housing Register. There was no one whom he could contact for assistance. When I commenced the application, I too got stuck at the same stage he had. When I sent an email request for help (you couldn't call), the response appeared formal, not nuanced enough to answer the question, I suspected that it was Ai generated, I had to send a further email for clarification.

Online systems are beneficial, but they ignore those who need support, have no access to the internet or who do not have English as a first language and would struggle with the instructions. People in such categories find Manna a great resource – even if they can access the internet on their phones, it's quite possible that they may run out of data, and places they can go to for assistance are becoming fewer. This is a concern with the greater encroachment of Ai.

A client whom Manna had housed - I'll call Tony, contacted us to let us know that he had been without electricity for two months. His command of English was weak, he was alone and occasionally we used his phone for translation. I called the utility company, it was a lengthy conversation which he could not have navigated without translation. The company required meter readings, I asked whether he could have been given help with this and was told he had been sent a text with instructions. My heart sank, I didn't think he would be able to follow such instructions and I was correct. He lived outside London now but still felt it was beneficial for him to

come to see us for assistance. Logistically, it was not practical for me to attend and collect the reading myself to commence proceedings.

I called the Estate Agent about this; it was clear she was depending heavily on Manna to support the client to resolve his issue. I asked whether she couldn't do more to help him, she replied that normally she would establish a video call with clients to set up their utility accounts, but she hadn't with this one as he couldn't speak English. In the third sector, it's common to "think outside the box". I suggested that she sent an email which he could translate, meanwhile I organized another appointment to prevent the real prospect of the tenancy breaking down because the client has threatened to leave as he was becoming exasperated.

### **Cuts in legal Aid**

*The legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012* came into force in April 2013. One area which experienced this cut was housing. The numbers of advice agencies and law centres attending court with people have decreased by 59% according to a Law Society report (January 2025) and some firms have closed their legal aid departments. This development can further disadvantage the more vulnerable elements of society, and Manna is an example of a charity which provides a buffer.

SN had received a negative S184 Housing decision from her local council, they were not going to house her. She had a month to appeal this document which was dripping with enough "legalese" to compel most people to seek legal assistance to request a review. SN came just before her deadline expired and I submitted a review request. The preliminary response from the council warned that the initial decision would be upheld and SN was directed to consider litigation if she still wished to challenge. SN decided to give up. Eventually the decision was overturned, the council accepted a duty to house her and undertook to provide temporary accommodation in the interim. But for Manna, she would have remained homeless.

As the composition of the client group which Manna deals with changes, the reasons for Manna's existence grow stronger. There has been an increase in the number of homeless refugees who attend the Centre seeking assistance and for many the language barrier alone is a significant obstacle to accessing services. The numbers of working poor - who cannot find affordable accommodation is increasing as are homeless women. Manna with its usual flexibility and agility continues to be a bridge between its clients and the services which they need and to humanize many of the processes.

### **Who used our services on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2025**

- **115 men**
- **3 women**
- Accommodation status:**
  - **Sleeping Rough – 55%**
  - **Hostel – 16%**
  - **Friends – 13%**
  - **Council / Housing Association – 11%**
  - **Private Rented – 4%**
  - **Other – 1%**

### ***Most needed items***

*We are in need of*

- *Sugar*
- *Coffee*
- *Tinned Tomatoes*
- *Tinned fish*
- *Tinned meat for soup*
- *Sandwich fillers:*
  - *Cheddar cheese*
  - *Luncheon meat*

*Any help you can give would  
be appreciated.*

# The increasing role of companies in supporting the Manna Centre

By  
**Bandi Mbubi**  
Manna Centre Director



We often talk about the tremendous contribution the Christian community has made to the Manna Society since its beginning. But we talk less about the increasing contribution of companies. This is largely because churches are the backbone of our support, particularly the Archdiocese of Southwark (R.C.), which provided us with the first building we used for the first 33 years of our existence - totally free of charge. And when we moved to our current building 10 years ago, they took out a long lease on our behalf. Although we pay a service charge on our new building (approx. £2,000 per month), it still is a great deal cheaper than if we were to pay a market rent for a similar building in such a prime location.

It is important to acknowledge the contribution of Anglican churches, as well as other Christian denominations, who support us with money, food, toiletries, and clothing. Whilst the contribution from churches and their parishioners have been our bedrock since we began, donations from companies have been steadily increasing over the past 10 years.

In writing this article, I hope that other companies keen to join in will reach out and explore opportunities to get involved with us.

The various redevelopment and regeneration programmes in our local area have created opportunities for businesses that have recently moved here to engage with our work. These businesses range from construction companies and IT firms to accountancy, law, consultancy firms, and food and restaurant businesses.

There isn't one single way companies work with us. Much depends on each company's size, resources, vision for charitable work, ambition for impact, and staff enthusiasm. For instance, some companies, although eager to be involved, can only afford occasional financial donations. Others are large enough and have sufficient resources to release their employees to volunteer with us. Through this involvement, their employees sign up for the London 10K run in July (see next page), which brings in an important financial contribution. Some companies have internal fundraising arrangements that allow employee donations to be matched by the company.

Most companies that send their employees to volunteer with us work in the computer room, facilitating the use of 11 laptops. This is an invaluable service, helping people access the internet for both leisure and more vocational activities. Most weeks, two or three companies run computer sessions, and on other days, individual volunteers take over. Our corporate volunteers are typically released by their companies for the days they work with us. The number of volunteer days employees are allowed usually varies from two to seven days a year, depending on company policy.

Although most companies that work with us end up in the computer room, Salesforce is the exception. They have enough employees to send volunteers both to the computer room and the kitchen. In the kitchen, they primarily wash dishes and load them into the steriliser. They also assist our full-time cook, Irena Boyle, with other tasks like cutting up vegetables.

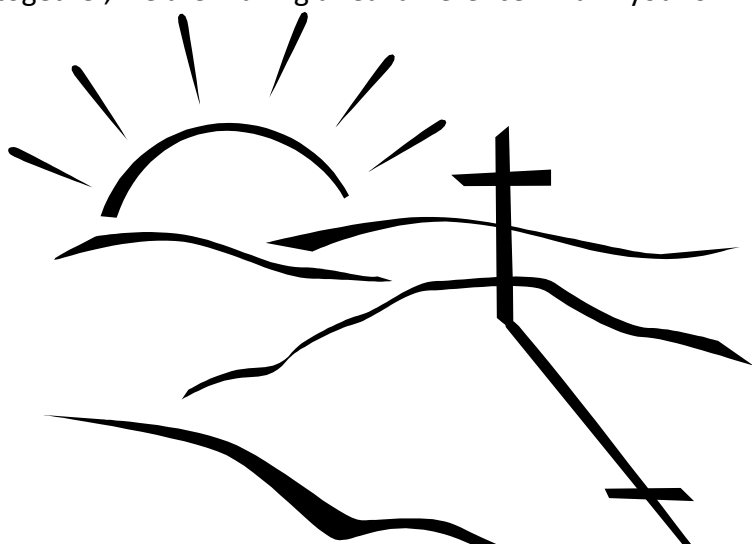
However, corporate social responsibility - or Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), as it's now fashionable to call it - didn't just begin 10 years ago. At the very beginning, what inspired our founder, Nannette Ffrench, was the gift of bread that a local bakery called Ticino, committed to giving to the Manna Centre every day. You can read all about it in the History section of our website.

Although, as a Christian organisation, our ethos stems from our Christian understanding of being each other's keeper, the corporate world, at its best, can emulate this pursuit. Much of what we stand for - accepting people as they are, love, and human dignity - are concepts that, even if expressed differently, resonate with our

corporate volunteers. While their local community outreach may be motivated by their company's responsibility to contribute to social development as part of their ESG efforts, we end up partnering in a way that aligns well with our pursuit of a more socially just society.

But we wouldn't be able to operate without the support of grant-making trusts. And also, the London Borough of Southwark has been providing us with grants for almost 20 years towards our Housing and Welfare Advice Service, which makes up about 12% of our overall income.

To every church, business, individual donor, volunteer, and grant-making trust who has supported us - whether with time, money, goods, or encouragement - we are deeply grateful. You are the reason we can continue this work, providing essential services and dignity to those who need it most. No act of kindness is too small, and together, we are making a real difference. Thank you for walking this journey with us!



*Would you like to help raise some funds for us and to get fit into the bargain?*

**The London 10K Run takes place on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2025.**

**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 £300 we would be delighted to hear from you.**

**Please contact Paddy at**

**[mail@mannasociety.org.uk](mailto:mail@mannasociety.org.uk)**

**More information about the run itself can be found at**

**<https://www.thelondon10k.com/>**



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