

The Manna Society Newsletter

Summer 2024

Working with homeless people & those in need



To Our Unsung Heroes, Thank You!

By

Bandi Mbubi

Manna Centre Director



It's easy to take people for granted, especially when they quietly support us without causing any worries. We can go for years, even a lifetime, without truly appreciating their contribution to our lives and wellbeing. This is the situation I find myself in. Although I've written on a plethora of issues, I haven't written much about the contributions of our volunteers. I only realised this after consulting colleagues at the day centre when I ran out of ideas for an article.

Tom McHugh challengingly said to me that we always write about everyone and everything in our newsletters but never mention the volunteers who are the lifeblood of our organisation. Tom is a no-nonsense guy. He said, "we should show more gratitude for what they do. Volunteers' contribution to our work is a great story to tell. And think of it! They're diverse. They come from diverse backgrounds, both racially and professionally. They were born and raised in the UK, but also come from all over the world. Some are local to us, on our doorstep around the Bermondsey area, while others come from as far as Kent, Essex, and other parts of the South East." It almost sounded as if he'd been thinking about it for a long time. After a short pause, he added, "there you are, you have your article – thank me later!" Then he burst out laughing, and Billy Innes, who was listening in, couldn't resist joining in the laughter.

Tom is right. I've written on so many topics, from the services we run, those who use them, our shortcomings and our successes, to homelessness and poverty in general, government policies and how they affect our service users, the way churches, Christians, and the wider society should respond to homelessness and poverty, and about anything else of general interest to our cause and supporters. But never have I highlighted the immense contribution of our volunteers. Only in passing do I reference them in my annual reports and thank them. Volunteers are like the air we breathe, so vital, yet how many of us consciously think about it unless it's perceptibly polluted?

Even though as a team we refrain from calling those who work alongside us staff, referring to them as volunteers since they aren't contractually obliged to turn up for work and aren't paid, you wouldn't know this based on their dedication and reliability. Day in, day out, they turn up for work. Considering that most are in retirement, with ailments associated with their age, like blood pressure, hip problems, and back pain, it's formidable that they continue to support us with their time and energy. Some of them are even involved in our fundraising activities such as doing sponsored runs. Many of them have been with us for well over ten years. Altogether each month between 25 and 40 volunteers work alongside 10 paid workers. But in the course of the year the number is well over 100 volunteers if you do an actual headcount which includes our corporate volunteers.

The bulk of our volunteers work in the kitchen, mostly washing dishes and putting them in the dishwasher to sanitise them. They also help, from time to time, our full-time cook, Irena Boyle, in the preparation of food, mostly cutting onions, carrots, and other vegetables when needed. During weekdays, three out of five volunteers in the kitchen are retirees. On Tuesdays a company called Salesforce, sends us their employees to work with us as kitchen volunteers. They come as a pair on an internally arranged rota to work with us in the kitchen. They are a great example of how responsible companies can contribute to wider community and social improvement and be sustainable.

At weekends, we have rotas for our volunteers to take turns on Saturday and Sunday. So volunteers work on the 1st Saturday or 1st Sunday of the month, others on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, or 5th (when this is the case) Saturday or Sunday of the month. They work alongside our part-time cook, Artur Handke. The kitchen volunteers alone come close to 20–25 people every month if we count the corporate volunteers individually. Special mention to the Worshipful Company of Couriers, who not only donate money to us but also send us their members to volunteer with us once a month. Together with our other volunteers, they help feed about 120 people every day, seven days a week.

Both our IT sessions and our clothing store are mostly run by volunteers. For our IT sessions, we've had a student on Mondays and a retiree on Fridays for much of the year. On the other three days, we've had corporate volunteers: Telefónica on Tuesdays, Salesforce on Wednesdays (in addition to their kitchen volunteering), and Kroll on Thursdays. Thanks to them, our service users can enjoy the wonders of the internet. After an IT session during which a service user had been listening to music, I asked a usually reserved service user why he was broadly smiling. He replied, "Bandi, music makes all the difference!" A total of between 10 and 15 volunteers come to our aid in this way every week. Given that volunteers sent by their employers may not be the same each time they come, on average we see about 20 IT volunteers each month.

In the clothing store, we have a team of 5 volunteers running the service on Mondays and Wednesdays with some input from paid day centre workers. Each day the service is running, we give out 30 tickets to the first 30 men on a first-come-first-served basis and as many women who are in need of clothes. We do this to encourage as many women to come forward, especially those who find it difficult to hang around a large group of men for a significant amount of time, and because only 5% of women use our day centre, we do everything we possibly can to remove anything some women perceive as a barrier to accessing this service. From experience, a good number of our women service users are selective about the services they use and how they access them—they don't hang around. For instance, our housing and welfare advice service is accessed by about 20% of women, compared to only 5% of women in the day centre.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the support we enjoy from the Junior League of London (JLL). They provide us with 4 to 6 volunteers, four times a year to help with the mailing of our newsletters. If you have received this newsletter by post the JLL members have folded it, packed it and labelled it! They also provide us with occasional volunteers to work in the kitchen when we run low on volunteers.

We're truly grateful for our volunteers' contribution to the work of the Manna Society. We hope to hold an event for our volunteers at 6pm on Wednesday 25th September, an hour before our AGM. I encourage everyone to come as it'll give us all a chance to meet together—service users, trustees, staff, and supporters. Some volunteers, although they've been working with us for years, I haven't yet met because they only come at weekends, and I work weekdays. The day will give us a chance to mingle and celebrate volunteers and their contribution to our common cause.

Peace unto you!

Invitation to The Manna Society AGM

For the first time in 5 years, we are having our AGM back in the centre once more – whoopee!

It will be at 7pm on Wed 25th September.

Please come along, we would be delighted to see you.

Roll of Honour

*With many thanks to our long
serving volunteers*

Barbara Caley



Vicky Wollard



Jackie Walsh



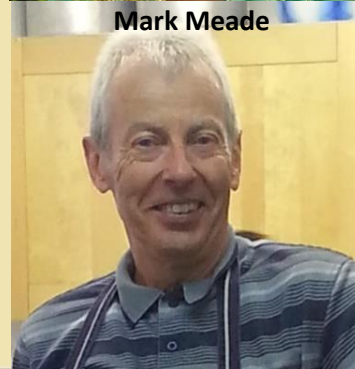
Uzonna Uwalaka



Cliff Bradshaw



Mark Meade



An invitation to ALL of our volunteers

*We would like to show our appreciation for all that you do
by inviting you to the centre at 6pm on Wednesday 25th
September (an hour before our AGM).*

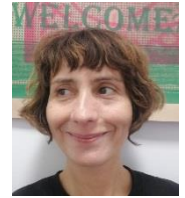
*We can have a chat and a cuppa and you can meet your
fellow volunteers.*

A scarcity of decent and affordable housing

By

Karolina Muszynska

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



We are living in the town where decent and affordable housing is becoming scarce, not only for the unemployed or those on a low income but also for those earning an average UK salary. Over the past 14 years at Manna I have observed a steady decline in the quality and the size of accommodation we can offer to our customers. At the same time rents have skyrocketed and benefit legislation around assistance with housing costs has become stricter (local housing allowance, bedroom tax, benefit cap etc). Local authorities are struggling to meet the demand for social housing, housing registers are overloaded offering no hope for those in the lower bands. Statutory assistance for a homeless person with no priority needs is limited to help to find private rented housing anywhere in UK. The majority of temporary accommodation provided by local authorities is sourced on the private market. As a result billions of pounds of taxpayers' money is pumped every day into the bank accounts of private landlords' via the housing element of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit. Those on an average salary often have to spend significant amount of their salary on rent and consider flat sharing if they are single. At the same time property owners invest any spare income into acquiring more properties and by doing so they push new buyers out of the market. My customers are struggling, my friends are struggling, and I am worried about my children's future housing options if they decide to settle in London.

The scarcity of decent and affordable housing creates an imbalance of power between landlords/property owners and tenants, where the former are the ones who dictate the conditions. We have all heard stories on the news about negligent landlords, black mould, leaks, pest infestation and rent increases. I often listen to those stories in my office and I feel quite powerless. We log complaints for our clients, we help them to find alternative places but ultimately this problem is only going to get bigger and bigger. It is because this is a systemic problem and it can be only addressed by central government. We need more affordable housing; we need to increase the supply of social housing and introduce some sort of rent control. If we keep ignoring this issue it will become increasingly difficult for everyone but the higher earners to continue to live and work in London. Affordable rents will also encourage more people who are unemployed to go to work as they will see the significant difference in their income. Affordable rents will ensure more equal distribution of wealth in society and will reduce the gap between the rich and the poor.

Housing is a basic human need and a basic human right. It is not a conditional right and paying rent should not put anyone into financial hardships. We all deserve a safe and a decent space that we can call home. If we want to create a happy and a nourishing society we need to ensure that everyone has a home, where they feel safe.

At present the biggest challenge for us in the advice service is to assist single people who are under 35 years old and can only claim local housing allowance (LHA) for a shared property. As many of you may know, Local Housing Allowance is used to calculate the maximum amount people renting from a private landlord can claim in Housing Benefit or Universal Credit in a particular area of the UK. You can check LHA rates on <https://lha-direct.vo.gov.uk>. To give you an example, a single



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unemployed person, under 35 years old in South London can claim £149.59 per week to cover her housing costs which makes a monthly rent of £648. It is literally impossible to find a room at that price in Southwark. The only alternative would be to refer those under 35 years old to supported accommodation providers, where the room is provided together with support and therefore the rent is exempt of LHA rules. A room in a supported setting can cost as much as £500 per week or more. Of course some of our customers will benefit from that support because of the difficulties they are facing. However many of our customers under 35 would be perfectly able to live in independent housing which as such does not exist. Paradoxically housing benefit departments are now questioning the support needs of customers and refusals to pay the supported accommodation rate is quite common. That means that there are no housing options for people under 35 years old who have no support needs. We do see cases of our clients being evicted from their supported accommodation because housing benefit questioned their support needs and refused to pay the rent. They come back to us frustrated and sadly there is nothing we can offer them apart from another referral to another supported accommodation in a different borough.

***“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old,
but on building the new”*** Socrates

**By
Margaret Shapland
Housing and Welfare Advice Worker**



As the first days of meteorological summer sweep in and the winds of change may be realised when the nation has had its say on the fourth of July, it seemed a good time to reflect on some of the changes that will be affecting the people who use our centre over the coming months.

Universal Credit – Managed Migration

It is nearly 14 years since Universal Credit was first proposed as a policy overhaul of the benefits system, and over ten years since its first claimants. As you may recall, Universal Credit brought six at that time separate benefits under one benefit umbrella for working age adults: namely, Housing Benefit, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA), Child Tax Credits (CTC), Working Tax Credits (WTC) and Income Support. 2024 is a critical year for Universal Credit as it marks the start of the long overdue process whereby current recipients of what are known as “legacy” benefits will migrate to Universal Credit. It is thought that over seven million households will be part of the Universal Credit system by 2029.

Over the 14 years that Universal Credit has been in operation, there have been big changes in the country – with unemployment looking set to remain relatively low for the remainder of 2024 and beyond. However, there exists a challenge for whomever is returned to power as the UK economic inactivity rate (21.9%) for those aged 16 to 64 years was largely unchanged in the latest quarter but is above estimates a year ago (October to December 2022). The annual increase was driven by those inactive because they were long-term sick, which remains at historically high levels.

Let's look at who broadly might be considered the winners and losers:

Working renters - winners

Working renters tend to come up on top, on average, from Universal Credit's restructuring of the benefit system. A single parent renter with a Local Housing Allowance of £150 per week, working 30 hours per week at the National Living Wage will be nearly £3,800 per year better off on Universal Credit than on legacy benefits in 2024-25. Additional gains for workers had come from Universal Credit's extension of benefit support to people working short hours, as well as providing support to younger workers, who are excluded from Working Tax Credit if they do not have dependent children or a disability. However, since the 13th May, the current government introduced new rules whereby over 180,000 Universal Credit claimants if they are working less

than half a full-time working week (the average full-time working hours are 7.2 per day or 36 hours – Standout CV based on Office of National Statistics figures) will be required to increase their earnings.

Those with a disability - losers

Universal Credit also shifted the make-up of support for people with ill-health and disability, with the result that disabled people are among the biggest losers, on average, from the reform. Single people with a disability that prevents them from working and who do not have a full-time carer – those who would previously have been in the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) support group and in receipt of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) – are around £2,800 per year worse off on Universal Credit in 2024-25 than on legacy benefits, once any transitional protection has been eroded or lost (If the amount that a recipient is entitled to on their existing benefits is more than they'll receive on Universal Credit, a top up is available. This is called 'transitional protection'). This additional amount is only available if the person has received a Migration Notice and claim by the deadline date on the Migration Notice letter. This is because the element of Universal Credit covering ill-health is set at a lower rate than the combination of ill-health support and disability premiums in ESA.

Moving to Universal Credit brings with it a number of other changes that may well be a shock to the system for those migrating from the legacy benefits.

The real value of the social security system

Today's social security system for working-age adults is significantly less generous than it was when Universal Credit was introduced in 2013. Seven-in-ten (71 per cent) of the 9.8 million households who are eligible for either Universal Credit or legacy benefits are worse off in real terms on Universal Credit in 2024-25 than they would have been under the legacy system in 2013-14, with an average difference among all eligible households of in the order of £1400 per year. Much of this is largely due to cuts in overall levels of working-age support. The many years of freezes and below-inflation uprating of benefit levels mean the base rate of out-of-work support is 6.7 per cent lower in real terms in April 2024 than it was in April 2013.

How different is Universal Credit in its structures

The way in which Universal Credit is structured will also be very new to those migrating.

Conditionality

There has always been some measure of conditionality in the benefits system-where continuation of benefits is dependent on satisfying certain conditions to continue being eligible for the financial support. Some of the benefits absorbed into Universal Credit – such as Housing Benefits or Tax Credits – did not have work-related to work search related requirements but Universal Credits extends conditionality to these benefits. In addition previously, conditionality largely applied to claimants who were out of work in legacy benefits. Universal Credit has brought working households into this group – some 840,000 currently. Conditionality has also become stricter – for example, requiring claimants to accept the job offer within a 90 minute commute after the first four weeks of claiming.

Sanctions

The impact of sanctions has been much higher than under Jobseekers Allowance and mostly due to Universal Credit claimants failing to attend mandatory work coach interviews. The proportion of sanctionable claimants (i.e. those that are expected to work and do not earn above a threshold exempting them from conditionality) that received a sanction each month between 2016-17 and 2018-19 was 1.0 per cent on Jobseekers Allowance and 4.2 per cent on Universal Credit.

Processing times

The mechanics of the Universal Credit system affect the experiences of claiming. The "five week" wait for a claim to be processed and paid. There was a well-meaning intention behind this practice; notably to avoid the previously frequent overpayments in the Tax credit system. However, research tells us the four in ten of Universal Credit claimants are not paid on a monthly basis and having a monthly assessment may result in income volatility. If a claimant receives differing payments or amounts during a single assessment period will

reduce or raise the next month's Universal Credit payment causing volatility in management of household income and – in the worst cases – lead to lower levels of entitlement on average.

Digital design

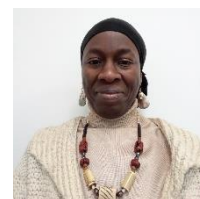
Apart from the ongoing issues of claimants having sufficient digital skills to navigate the system, there are other impacts – some good, such as the speed of being able, during COVID, to implement the £20 a week increase. Others less so, in that it became easier for the Department of Work and Pensions to directly deduct outstanding debts. As of February 2023, forty-five percent of Universal Credit claimants had some form of deduction from their award – such as for budgeting advances (usually, payments provided to tide claimants over the period whilst their claim is processed) or tax credit overpayments. Deductions can also be made directly to cover debts to third parties such as utilities, council tax, court fines, child maintenance or rent arrears. In some cases, these direct deductions can be helpful in that the claimant will know with certainty what income they have; on the other hand, it takes away the potential for the person concerned to negotiate with their creditors to manage their debt at an affordable level. The maximum level of deduction is 25% of the award overall. Apart from the considerable changes that this migration will bring to those affected by it and the need for those on the legacy benefits to seek quality advice on how it will affect them personally and how they might protect themselves from dramatic shifts in their income by understanding how transitional protection can assist them in negotiating the financial impacts, there are wider implications for the country as a whole and the policies that any incoming government might consider. The nation's demographic make-up has changed since the introduction of Universal Credit. As a nation, we are older and sadly, sicker. Those who will be making policy decisions going forward will have to consider how a policy developed in the late 2000s works in the late 2020s.

Combatting Rough Sleeping - a view from the ground

By

Chinasa Nnoka

Housing & Welfare Advice Worker



When I worked for a previous employer, three episodes stood out for me in how we dealt with homeless clients, because of the legislation at the time. I triaged a young woman who advised that her relationship had broken down due to her substance misuses, her husband had taken their children and she had no access to the family home. She had spent the night in the park. She had no documents to confirm her identity or homelessness. I referred this to the Duty Manager who told me that without any documents to confirm homelessness, the woman could not be assisted. She went away and returned the next day, telling me how dangerous it had been sleeping in the park that night and it had been raining still she could not be assisted, a haunting memory-particularly as we had been at school together. Another homeless client met the criteria of homelessness priority need and possibly a homeless duty. A different Duty Manager observed that she could not place this man anywhere as his support needs were too high. “Then where does he go?” I wondered in disbelief.

During a cold snap when SWEP (Severe Weather Emergency Protocol) was enacted which accommodates all rough sleepers until the temperature reaches a target level, some Hoteliers complained about homeless people putting their clothes in a Microwave, setting off the smoke alarms repeatedly - unaccustomed to being in a closed environment. One Charity worker observed that a recently housed ex rough sleeper would continue to frequent his old haunts because he was unused to being accommodated.

The Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018 which all Councils have to enact, aims to end rough sleeping by 2027, would now see different outcomes or enhanced support mechanisms for the people whom I have mentioned. I am confident of this because Central Government has committed finances to the initiative, to employ and train more homelessness workers, support workers and bed spaces. There are new Initiatives to reach out to homeless people, “Street Link is an example, homeless people or members worried about a homeless people can refer to this service who will work with the person to help find accommodation. When they connect with

rough sleepers, they enter their details on a database and a CHAIN reference number is given (Combined Housing and Information Network) which serves as proof of the client's rough sleeping which is invaluable in circumstances where so many wouldn't have the documentary evidence to prove their homelessness.

Local authority Homelessness and Rough sleeping strategies are to be made available online and Central Government will take action against those who do not comply demonstrating practical and legislative support to resolve this issue. In their support for rough sleepers the 2017 Code of Guidance 2.67 asks Councils to "look at alternative ways to provide accommodation and support that might improve outcomes for people who have slept rough adding that authorities may wish to consider whether existing arrangements are working or whether" Housing First" or other service models might be more effective".

Manna is located in the Southwark Borough, which won an award for its Trail blazer pilot in 2017 that employed people with a lived experience of homelessness and created pathway plans for its vulnerable clients linking it to its Housing First model-the main target being to stop repeat homelessness. The commitment to the Housing First model, I find encouraging, it aims to rapidly rehouse rough sleepers who have complex needs, may not be ready to maintain a tenancy independently and or have a history of repeat homelessness, supporting them to live in the property and maintain their homes. The creation of local letting agencies to support people into accommodation is another useful resource. The two people I referred to at the beginning would have found it easier to be housed under the present system.

The Housing First system has 7 principles it operates by and studies have discovered that if providers can adhere to all or most of these then 80-100% of the service users remain in their homes within the first two years.

Another offspring of the Rough Sleeping Strategy is the Clearing House Scheme which has units to house people who have slept rough, 75%of these have to have come straight from the streets, an initial pilot found 92% of the clients who went through this scheme did not return to rough sleeping.

It's fortuitous that the code of guidance which accompanied the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 stipulated that homelessness strategies have to be refreshed every five years by law and recognised that Local authorities could not combat homelessness alone but needed to involve criminal justice, health service and third sector organisations.

I believe the strategy requires further collaborative working. Outreach teams found that between January and March of 2024, 4,118 people were counted as rough sleepers in London a 33% increase on the same period in 2023. CRISIS, counted over 2,000 who had to sleep rough for the first time between January and March 2024 and this was a 37% increase on the same period in 2023. These increases are ascribed to the cost-of-living increases and rising rents and low incomes.

The Refugee Council produced a report noting a 234% increase in homelessness amongst Refugees between September 2023 and January 2024 and 90% of these constituted newly recognised Refugees. This group must have significantly contributed to the widely reported general increase in rough sleeping and that has certainly been my observation, ideally this should be acknowledged and a strategy to combat rough sleeping here be fed into the next review. To end homelessness amongst this group Enver Solomon, CEO of the Refugee Council recommends a Tenancy Deposit Fund, better Tenancy Support and the extension of the move -on period from 28 to 56 days, noting that the major challenges for this group, to accessing housing assistance is the language barrier and familiarity with the system here. As long as the Rough Sleeping Strategy remains fluid enough to incorporate change and maintains its person-centered ethos, it will proceed in the right direction, I believe through not necessarily at the desired speed.

Most Needed Items

At this time of year some of our supplies start to run low. Could you help us with any of the following items?

FOOD

Sugar

Tinned tomatoes

Soup

Tinned vegetables

Baked Beans

Pasta Sauces

Tinned meat

Coffee

Many thanks