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[Sport](#) [Review](#) [Travel](#) [Cash](#) [Observer Woman](#) [The Observer Magazine](#) [Food](#) [Music](#)**World****Polish aid teams sent to Britain**

Charity mounts a UK rescue mission to help thousands of penniless and homeless immigrants

Daniel McLaughlin
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A Polish charity is sending volunteers to Britain to help thousands of immigrants from eastern Europe who have fallen into homelessness, alcoholism and prostitution.

The Barka Foundation is responding to an urgent call for help from British charities unable to cope with a growing number of people from Poland and the Baltic states who arrived looking for work but ended up living on the streets.

A Barka team plans a trip this month to study the plight of some of the hundreds of thousands of people who have come from eight former communist countries since they joined the EU in May 2004. Then, before the winter, the charity, based in the Polish city of Poznan, hopes to establish the first in a network of permanent help centres across Britain, to offer down-and-out immigrants food, shelter, and advice on how to make headway in Britain or return home.

'A great number of people from the accession countries have no work, no resources and no family network in Britain, and they are falling into despair and doing anything to survive,' said Tomasz Sadowski, the president of Barka. 'There are at least 400,000 new Polish arrivals in Britain, and many others from neighbouring countries, and thousands of them are now in difficulties,' he added. 'Men take to stealing, drinking and fighting. Women try to offer their services in order to earn some money.'

The foundation was alerted by charities in London that have been overwhelmed by the rise in East Europeans sleeping on the city's streets. 'At least 30 per cent of people now sleeping rough in central London are from the new EU accession countries,' said Tim Nicholls, director of the Simon Community, which has worked with Britain's homeless for more than 40 years. 'They're relying on soup-runs and drop-in centres to stay alive.'

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'We got in touch with the Barka Foundation because we don't speak Polish and need volunteers to help us as soon as possible,' said Nicholls. 'There are lots of people here in very dire need, and in danger of becoming a new generation of long-term rough sleepers.'

Thousands of people have left Poland every month since it joined the EU, fleeing the country with the highest unemployment in the region for such places as Britain and Ireland which, along with Sweden, opened their labour markets to citizens of the new EU states. Most migrants from eastern Europe find work and earn at least enough to live in modest accommodation, eat regularly and save money or send it home to their families. And by taking jobs with employers who struggle to fill vacancies - in construction, farming, retail and catering - analysts say they have boosted the British economy.

Failure to find work, however, can suck them into a steep downward spiral. Unless they have worked for 16 months in Britain and paid all their national insurance contributions, they cannot claim benefits, and without claiming they are not allowed to sleep in state-funded hostels. The charities that try to pick up the pieces are 'all under strain', said Alastair Murray of the Housing Justice Unleash organisation. 'We're seeing lots of people who are finding it difficult, don't speak much English and don't have much clue about how things work here.'

Local radio stations in Britain have begun broadcasting adverts in Polish to advise workers of their rights. But Sadowski still fears for thousands of his countrymen here. 'Some Poles are getting into terrible situations and unscrupulous people are taking advantage of that,' he warned. He will meet senior Polish officials this week to discuss funding for the help centres. Support is growing in Warsaw, but the scheme has yet to attract any official response from Westminster.

'The government is being too slow on this and the situation is becoming drastic,' said Murray.

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