



Personal
Transitions
Service

By Mayday Trust



WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE SYSTEM?

Why the Personal Transitions Service is different from the rest

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1. What's wrong with the system?

From years of listening and deeply reflecting on what people have shared and through evolving and delivering the Personal Transition Service (PTS), Mayday has unearthed the following system failures which impact directly on a person's ability to move on from tough times.

Through [Wisdom from the Street](#), an inquiry which captured the voices of people experiencing homelessness, two main problems were identified:

- The system and processes when you become homeless are at best dehumanising, embarrassing, at times re-traumatising and at worst institutionalising, trapping people in services
- The results aren't good enough (supported by St Andrew's Supporting People data) too many people either stay in the system for too long or leave only to return to services

More recently, growing numbers of people are not 'engaging' with services due to a breakdown in trust caused by a number of system factors.

Mayday reflected on and evaluated the experiences of those who contributed to the Wisdom's. Interestingly the answers to 'what works' were not found within the homeless sector, but in sources far beyond. For example, in Harvard's research on Executive Coaching and work carried out by the Search Institute in the US looking at a Positive Youth Work Model. Gradually three critical system failures became apparent:

Focus on weakness – Fixing – Segregation

Focus on weaknesses

There is a body of evidence that proves that if you focus continually on someone's weaknesses they only get so far, personal development and progress is limited and people are unlikely to sustain the change. Whereas if you build on what people are good at, if people have evidence that they can succeed, it improves internal motivation and change is at its most likely to be sustained. So what this tells us is that the UK system based on needs, risks and deficits is never systematically going to work.

Fixing

Fixing is the art of focusing on the problem not the person. This is probably the biggest barrier to personalisation and to people getting through their tough time. By focusing on needs, whether that be complex needs, multiple needs, dual dependency, diagnosis, we fail to get an insight and understanding into the person and the causes, connections and barriers to sustaining positive change.

If someone is drinking to cope with childhood trauma, working on abstinence, trying to ‘fix’ their drinking is likely never to work.

‘Fixing’ doesn’t work. No matter how passionate organisations and individuals are about changing what they perceive as people’s harmful behaviour, without a wider understanding of who the person is, they will almost never succeed. Yet every day, workers are trying to help people **‘fix’** their issues, their drug use and their mental health problems. The impact of this is that we end up compounding people’s belief that their situation is hopeless. If the person has become institutionalised, they will have built up an entire history of repeated failures within the system, so they will have limited evidence that they can have a different life which creates a huge psychological barrier for change.

Segregation

Being segregated impacts on a person’s self-esteem, values and how they feel about their role within a community. The Wisdoms told us that people often only talked to their key worker, professionals or other homeless people. People have become isolated from mainstream society – with the homeless GP, the homeless art class, and the homeless haircut, there is no core focus on developing relationships and purpose outside the homeless sector and to reintegrate. For many who have spent years in the homeless sector, the psychological leap required to move on is too great. Yet most organisations in the sector solely work to build up a person’s sense of identity, community, family **within** homeless services. Organising community gatherings, days out, group activities and then expect people to happily settle into an isolated flat leaving all that they have become familiar with and attached to behind, only to be surprised when people return to services.

2. It’s the system not the people - why current interventions, new initiatives will never end homelessness

There is no denial of the housing crisis and the lack of affordable accommodation which underlies the problem of homelessness, but this is further hidden and exacerbated by failing, beyond this, to identify the real problem that we are trying to solve.

Through Mayday’s second Wisdom Inquiry [Wisdom from Behind Closed Doors](#) and as a result of system failures identified from the original Wisdoms, it is clear that the culture, practices and interventions that have evolved within the deficit system directly impact on people’s ability to get out of services.

From what people shared, there is no doubt of the significant negative psychological impact on individuals who go through the deficit informed system. The practices and culture that reinforce peoples weaknesses and institutionalise people include; needs and risk assessments, support planning, use of the term ‘complex needs’, controlled or unsafe environments such as hostels and

supported housing, which often limits a person's ability to work and exposes them to criminality or abuse.

No matter how unsafe or challenging, if your identity, your status, your connections, your routine and everything that is familiar to you is all **within** services, a huge psychological leap is required to move back into the community. However, when people fail to make that leap after long periods in supported housing, it is seen as their personal failure and not system failure.

The extent to which psychological dependence is created by deficit approaches, is mainly unseen and the extent to which the system is institutionalising people as yet, not recognised commonly in the homelessness and supported housing sector in the UK. More recently discussions on 'othering' have begun and the PTS message of treating people as people is growing in understanding.

Pathologising

The system, when you become homeless, is process led therefore copes better with people going through tough times as a homogeneous group or 'cohorts'. It fails to deal with complexity. Most people's 'issues' do not remain static or unchanged. Measurement of outputs serve only to drive models of service that are based on the lowest common denominators – collating the number of homeless people who need help to maintain a tenancy equates to 'debt classes for all' whether you need them or not. This lack of a personalised approach does two things:

- Reinforces individuals feeling of hopelessness and helplessness
- Increases the risk of people being pathologised and labelled for what is in truth systems failure.

This is further exacerbated as labels often attract siloed funding. Statistics such as '*1:4 people have a mental health problem*' may attract a government funding pot for a local authority or provider, but fails to provide a true understanding of the situation. For example, many people do not have a mental health problem, but instead display behaviours and feelings that are a very understandable reaction to being homeless. The impact of that mental health label could be devastating and long lasting, either through the person internalising that they are ill, or a GP file affecting their ability to travel or own a home. The lack of ability of the system to deal with the individuality and complexity of reasons why people are on the street and how their distress and emotional well-being is supported and measured equates to people seldom receiving the right intervention at the right time.

This is why the PTS promotes the concept that **people are more than a sum of their problems**. This is fundamental to the practice, but even in the best person centred work, the narrative of 'needs' forms a part. The underlying assumption is that people cannot leave homelessness without working on or receiving support on their 'issues'. The PTS is building evidence that this is not the case.

Messaging - pity stories

Many charities within the system, rely on public fundraising campaigns to survive. This often involves portraying people as helpless victims with hard luck stories. These are sometimes organisations who initially evolved out of genuine passion and concern, but have come under pressure to professionalise fundraising and raise more and more funds to compete with a state and contract funded civil society. Organisations who present these desperate images of people as victims or happy, smiling success stories are often oblivious to the message that this is giving to people in services. It colludes with giving the message that people in services are different, they need help and will always need help to survive. This has a significant impact as people move on with their lives, many relapse as they lack the reassurance that they have their own internal resources and strengths to get through tough times. This inability of the system to take account and build on people's own internal and external assets is a major systemic failure.

Messaging – don't give to people begging on the street

Recent campaigns, initiatives and interventions that promote donating to the organisation/campaign and not to the individual, while well intentioned, will never stop people giving money to people begging and promotes a lack of empathy to people in a tough situation. Most people who contributed to the Wisdoms felt that this contributed to the breakdown of trust between services and people experiencing homelessness. It colluded with negative public perceptions of people on the street being 'druggies' and 'criminals'.

Campaigns such as 'help us help them' is not only a case of 'othering', it also reinforces the idea that a person going through a tough time is unable to survive without being 'rescued' by services. There is a need for longitudinal measurement of 'quick fixes' against approaches such as the PTS, which allows the person to see how their own internal resources/strengths have helped them overcome their tough time alongside any external support. Organisations should not claim 'outcomes' when the best outcome is for individuals to do things for themselves. People gain evidence that they can deal with their own crisis and this equates to more sustainable long term positive change.

Criminalisation

Whether organisations or charities give out messages of 'don't give to people begging on the street' or local authorities and some businesses create architectural structures to prevent rough sleeping, the message to individuals is more and more, that you cannot be trusted, you are a criminal for sleeping rough, you do not have the same rights as 'normal' people to sit or use public spaces. Less overt means of criminalising those on the street are social care contracts, which are focused more on social control than social care. Commissioners under pressure to 'clean up the street' not to care for the people sleeping there. People sleeping rough are well aware of 'support versus control' measures. This also leads to 'disengagement' and people being branded as 'trouble makers' opposed to being listened to.

Gaming for resources/meaningless data

A significant impact of this broken system is the emergence of numerous frameworks and tools which are used to 'measure' success and outcomes of progression for people going through tough times. But when asked, most commissioners and providers who work to, for example, outcome funding will admit that the data does not provide an accurate measurement of success and the data is seldom used to inform practice improvement on any sort of scale. With no generic definitions of hard outcomes, benchmarking between providers cannot happen resulting in smaller charities who cannot afford business development teams losing out in funding despite the impact of their work. It also wastes a lot of people's time in producing meaningless data.

Government silos

The UK government both locally and nationally is informed by deficit thinking, despite the growing body of evidence and research that rejects this concept. As a result, funding is directed to 'fixing problems' instead of investing in people and communities. Monies are allocated for homelessness, drugs and alcohol, mental health, care leavers etc and picked up by statutory services who then commission around the siloed issues. This leads to on the ground labelling and pathologising of individuals, the abundance of terms such as dual diagnosis, multiple and complex needs, when the reality of the situation is that people are being assessed by multiple systems and accessing all of these has become complicated! There are many examples across Europe of government funds coming to local areas through non siloed routes, which free up local government and statutory services to invest in people and communities and witness much less 'illness and disadvantage'.

Government silos appear to have created perverse incentives. By siloed funding around issues, commissioners request data to draw down funding, providers assess people to identify their 'problem labels', and industries grow up to fix these problems. Most organisations have failed to recognise how this siloed funding has evolved to negatively impact on individuals within the system:

Charlie had been sleeping rough for 10 years, he was a heavy drinker and although he had been to rehab 4 or 5 times, he never managed to give up and as a result he has never held down a tenancy. Charlie drinks to survive the loneliness on the street, he believes this is the only way he can survive.

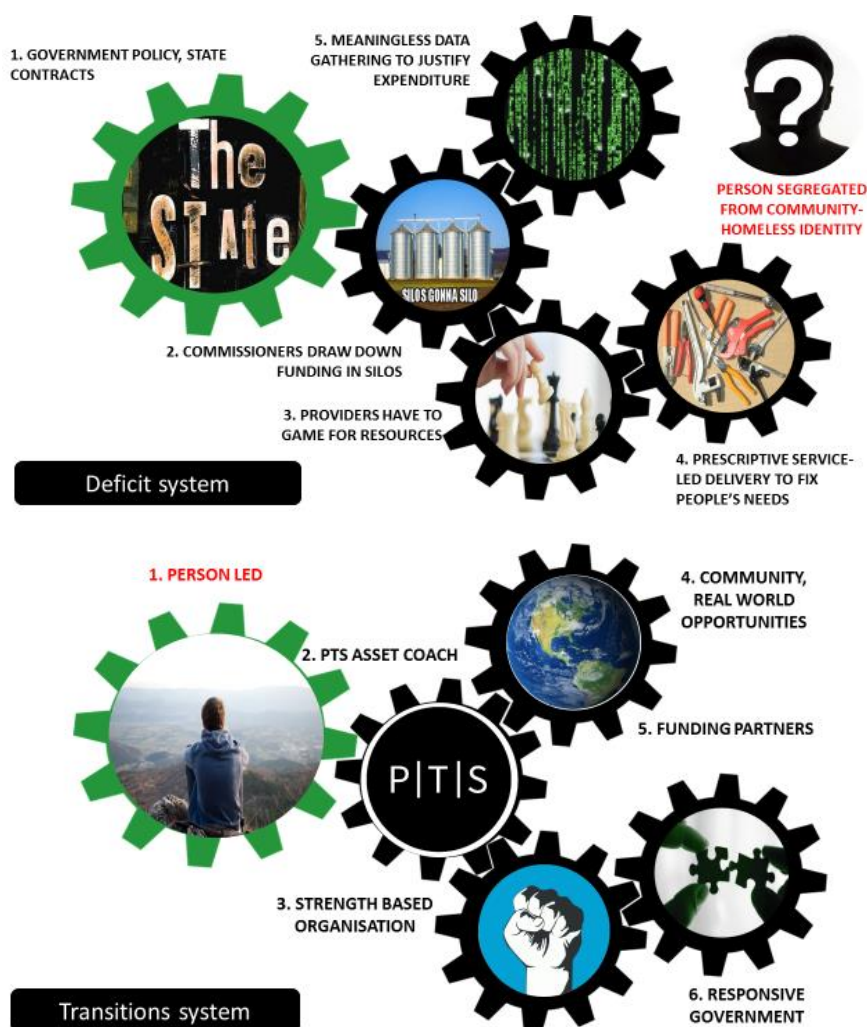
- *A 'FIXING' approach is where the problem prohibiting Charlie from exiting homelessness is viewed as his drinking so we must get Charlie to stop.*
- *A PTS approach listens to Charlie's situation and tackles his loneliness.*

However, because of 'system fixing' Charlie has built up a history of self-defeating beliefs. He has internalised his inability to give up drinking as his personal failure when it actually was a failure of the system to respond to the right problem. The impact of repeated 'fixing' means that people have lost hope and motivation and the role of the coach is to understand the impact of people's history in the system and contra this with PTS interventions.

Combined the system is formidable and no amount of tweaking will humanise or create an environment where individuals will be successfully supported through their tough time with dignity and respect. So it is time to call out this broken system and together create a paradigm shift which will create a better life for all.

3. Transitions – a viable system model

There has been a lot of talk about ‘the System’ but Mayday wanted to map out what this system looked like and what a new person led system could be. In visualising the system, we identified that the system/s that are set up to help people are responsible to marginalising and taking away any power and control from people the system was set up to help.



A person led system recognises that all of us go through tough times, some without the usual safety net but if we provide the right personal intervention at the right time, homelessness will not be a life choice and certainly not a life sentence.

4. Reasons why the PTS is different

The Personal Transition Services (PTS) is a new whole system approach to tackling tough times.

Problem definition

The PTS aims to support people going through tough times. The majority of approaches focus on the people, problems or issues - complex needs, multiple needs. The PTS focuses on the system and the impact of system barriers on individual's wellbeing and ability to transition through their tough time.

Uniquely PTS sees the problem as the systematic pathologising and institutionalisation of people who are going through tough times. The siloed thinking and behaviours within the current systems and structures for people going through tough transitions such as homelessness, leaving prison, coming from care or other institutions and experiencing emotional distress, serves only to label, trap and create service dependency perpetuated by care industries, well-intentioned but inflexible and **System led not people led.**

Through our work on [Wisdom from the Street](#), our problem definition is defined by people within the system and is different to the problem as defined by national and local government and service providers who very much focus on 'vulnerable individuals'.

Grassroots- based on listening - not applied learning- prototyping not co production

The PTS has been developed in response to listening and deeply reflecting on how people have described their experience of homelessness services. The last 8 years has been focussed on prototyping, testing and reflecting on our interactions with people using services. This has provided a great insight into the real world challenges of ending homelessness while shaping and directly influencing the approach.

Paradigm system shift

The PTS is about deconstructing the current UK deficit focused support system and reconstructing a system built around the person. Most approaches and new innovation focuses on making the current system more efficient. The focus of PTS Coaches is to support people to recognise and understand system barriers and failures and get connected with their own strengths and resources or provide opportunities to move out of services, so coaches are more like 'system activists' than support workers!

More than a service model

The PTS is not a service model. Delivery of the model aims to expose system barriers and be the instigator for internal organisational culture change and external influencer for wider systemic

change. The PTS accreditation is a way of embedding empathy, ensuring responses treat people with dignity as well as clearly identifying the requirements within the wider organisation to create a culture that facilitates people led work and a learn and adapt way of working e.g. coaches are responsible to people they work with and not to a traditional management hierarchy.

A PTS approach sees people as more than a sum of their problems/labels which results in greater 'engagement' and success in sustaining positive life changes. Current approaches focus on 'what's wrong with people'. Yet there is a body of evidence that proves that if you focus continually on someone's weaknesses they only get so far, personal development/progress is limited and people are unlikely to sustain the change. Whereas if you build on what people are good at, if people have evidence that they can succeed, it improves internal motivation and change is likely to be sustained. A core intervention of the PTS is to purposely assist people to build evidence for themselves of what they are good at. This creates the optimum opportunity for people to achieve positive life change for themselves.

People voluntarily work with a coach and attendance at sessions is 80% with many people contacting their coach if they are unable to make the appointment. Previous traditional support working had a highest rate of engagement of 50%. There are strong indicators that a significant number of people, who have been part of the PTS approach are sustaining long term positive change.

A PTS theory of change aims to build internal motivation and resilience, not achieve hard outcomes.

Unlike approaches that focus on achieving hard outcomes, the PTS focuses on building internal and external assets which as a by-product will assist the person to achieve hard outcomes but critically important, the person will be connected with their own abilities and resources and an external network of support, that will also help them to get them through their next tough time without needing services. This aligns to what all of us need to get through a tough time.

5. In recognition of people who contributed to our change of thinking, behaving and working

Mayday and PTS partner organisations have evolved an alternate response to tackling homelessness through responding to what over 300 people told us about their experiences of homeless services. It is the problems that they have identified that we have endeavoured to respond to. We appreciate their openness and honesty, it has opened our eyes to a wholly new prism on a long term, growing social injustice.