

Wisdom from the Pandemic

Capturing the voices of people sleeping rough, living in hotels or hostels, or those who sought their own solution during COVID-19 lockdown.



Introduction

Mayday was asked by Westminster City Council (WCC) to capture people's experiences of lockdown during COVID-19; specifically, people who were sleeping rough, offered a space in hostel or hotel, or sought another solution.

Mayday put together a team of seven people who went to London to strike up conversations with people who were on the streets, all of whom were happy to talk with us.

The Wisdoms methodology is focused around unstructured conversations in places that people feel comfortable to talk. With implications on COVID-19 this method was adapted and social distancing measures were put in place when required. Teams also ensured that everyone was comfortable in face to face situations.

The Mayday team carried out a total of 60 conversations in the Westminster area during July and August in 2020. The conversations took place over the phone, face to face and via email. The following document captures the main themes which were identified from what was heard. Conversations were initiated with a single question – **What was your experience of lockdown during COVID-19?**

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COVID has brought my life together and I've been handed help that I never got before.... I'm 68 years old and have been on the streets 5 years...

A small Superman figurine is positioned on a piece of weathered, dark driftwood. The background is a soft, hazy sunset or sunrise with warm orange and yellow tones. The overall mood is contemplative and resilient.

1 of 8. A hotel room in a time of crisis

Of the people who Mayday spoke to who had moved into a hotel, many had a positive experience and were offered help quickly that wasn't available to them before COVID. Experiences varied across hotels and locations, but the connection to what some people described as 'normality' appeared to have a positive impact on wellbeing.

"Quarantine has been good for me, I've been living in a hotel. I didn't particularly receive any help before, I lived on the streets for about 6 months."

For some people the sudden and extreme change provided an opportunity to reconsider their life and to make a change, believing that change was possible when previously it hadn't been.

"COVID kicked me up the backside to come inside. Coming from prison, I was already inside, but this is different. I would never have believed a year ago that I would be inside today. I'm happy to be inside now, I'm feeling healthier."

For a small number of people moving into a hotel resulted in moving into more permanent accommodation, this was seen as a positive move, although people expressed anxiety over what would happen after this point.

"I went into a hotel, it was fine. I worked with Connections already so they put me in a hotel straight away. I was there for 3 months. I'm now in a studio flat from the council where I can stay for three months. After that who knows."

People expressed confusion and anger as to why they had no choice but to sleep on the streets before, for years in some cases, and then suddenly, due to COVID, many people were given somewhere safe to stay.

"Before we weren't important, left outside. Then all of a sudden we're in. It's only because they thought we might make them sick. As long as they're ok."

"It was as if we weren't human, homeless people are not seen as human and no one cares about us."

I've been here for two months when I was told I would only be here 28 days. I've had flat viewings, I was even accepted for somewhere, but nothing came of it.

2 of 8. An uncertain future

Like everyone during COVID the people the team spoke to struggled with the level of uncertainty the pandemic created. However, for people rough sleeping, living in hotels and hostels, this was magnified. Many people felt nervous moving into accommodation as they were unsure how long they would be there and where it would lead.

“I’m in a hotel still, tomorrow I’m going to another hotel in Camden. I should be able to stay there for around 2 months and then we will see what happens.’

In some situations people felt the accommodation, such as hostels, was having a negative impact on them and they feared becoming trapped for a long period of time.

“They said it’s only for a short time, but I know someone who has been there seven months, that isn’t a short time. I’m going to end up back on the streets.”

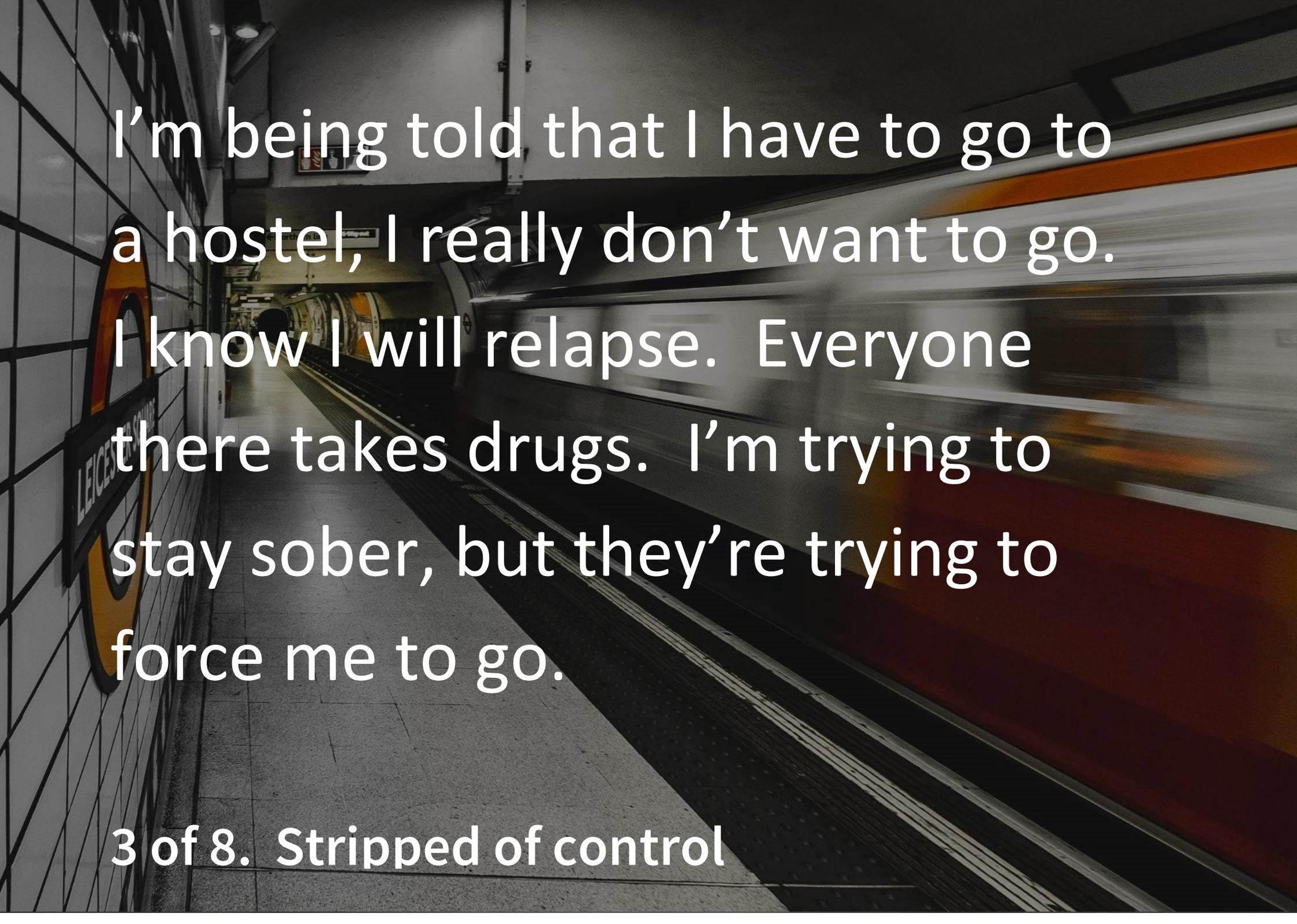
Once people had moved into accommodation communication with staff often broke down, resulting in heightened anxiety about the future. Many sympathised with the staff, as they seemed to be as unsure as they were, but over time this often turned into frustration and resentment.

“I was in a hotel, they kept moving me every two weeks, I don’t know why; there was not trouble or anything. Then one day they kicked everyone out, no warning. Now I’m back on the street exactly where I was before.”

“I left the hotel last month, I’m in Stratford now sharing a flat with 4 other people. I didn’t have a choice about where I was moving too, I’m not familiar with the area. I’m hoping I’ll be able to move somewhere else soon.”

A feeling of stability where people can settle and create a home is what a number of people longed for, but instead one of the few options available is private renting which people remain fearful of due to the uncertainty over length of stay.

“They’re talking about moving me on to private rented but I don’t want that, I want a studio council flat. You hear bad stories about private, it’s expensive and there’s no stability. If a landlord decides to sell you have to leave. I want a council flat for the stability.”

A blurred high-speed train is moving past a subway platform. The train is silver with a red stripe. The platform has a tiled wall on the left with a yellow and black sign that says "LEICESTER". The text is overlaid in white on the image.

I'm being told that I have to go to a hostel, I really don't want to go. I know I will relapse. Everyone there takes drugs. I'm trying to stay sober, but they're trying to force me to go.

3 of 8. Stripped of control

The People the team spoke to both on the streets and in hostel or hotel accommodation expressed that the little control they had over their lives had been taken away during COVID. They were told where to go and what to do, and often felt unheard. There were many examples of there being a response to the crisis, rather than the individual, and in most cases this resulted in people leaving or refusing a space in a hotel or hostel.

“Yeah, they offered me a room in Battersea but I’ve got no money to get there. My doctors are here, my script is here – I don’t have a choice but to stay here. I told them, but I suppose they did what they had to do and it’s my problem now. I was scared, everyone was scared.”

“The window was broken in my room. Security didn’t believe me. Like I’d make something like that up.”

Adjusting from rough sleeping to staying in a hotel or hostel was a huge challenge for many of the people who spoke to the team. People often felt a greater sense of isolation than they had experienced on the streets. In many cases people were moved to an entirely new area which created additional barriers, such as, people having to travel to their registered doctors, networks and being cut off from resources that they had previously used to survive.

“They gave me a room in a hotel. It was miles away. I was lonely, everyone I know is here. I didn’t know what was going on, how long I was going to be there, so I came back here. It’s quieter, less noise than before. I think lockdown was for other people.”

In other cases, people seemed to fall between the gaps, and left no other option but to take control of their situation. Seeking out places to self-isolate, which were often unsuitable and inhumane.

When I called the night shelter to say I was coming back and that I had been ill they told me I shouldn’t come back and that my space had been given away. They threw my stuff away. I am so angry.

“I knew of a place so I found a broken window at a swimming baths and isolated in there. My friend who is also homeless would bring me food, sometimes from The Passage. One night I was really bad, I couldn’t breathe properly, I managed to get my friend to call an ambulance.”

Living in a hostel is no life.
It doesn't help with my
depression. The atmosphere
feels like a graveyard in there.

4 of 8. An impossible situation



Almost without exception, the move from the streets into a hostel, or from a hotel to a hostel was negative, many people felt it was safer to be on the streets. In hostels people reported being surrounded by drugs and alcohol, constantly exposed to noise, and very little privacy.

People who spent time in a hotel during COVID often shared that it was an insight into normal life and what ‘normal people’ get to experience. In hotels, people felt they had a space to think and start looking to the future. In stark contrast, those who moved into hostels said they could only think of how to escape the noise and chaos which came from that form of accommodation. People spoke of the challenges of living alongside people who are all going through tough times.

“It becomes impossible to avoid people. Everyone in there has their own stuff going on. It’s crazy. It’s hard to move forward when you’re surrounded by chaos.”

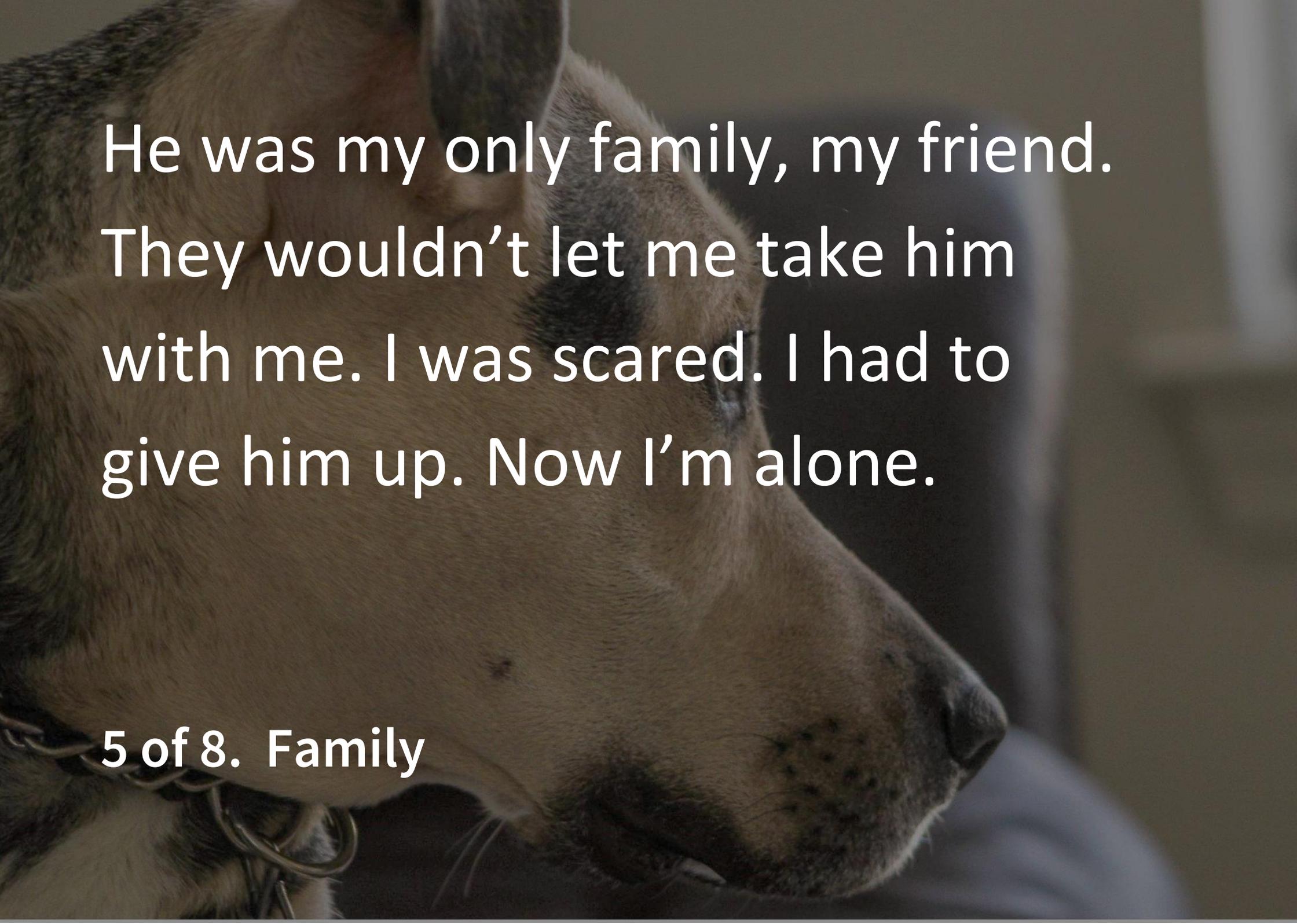
“The hotel room was small but I liked it there, it was quiet, I could get some peace. They moved me to this hostel and I hate it, I want to move out. There are many people living here, they are alcoholics and they smoke drugs. They are loud, they play their music loud and they fight a lot, I don’t know why I was put here, I can’t sleep at night because of all the noise. I just want to get my own place, work and relax.”

“Everyone there takes drugs in there. I’m trying to stay sober, but they are trying to force me to go. I’m going to end up back on the streets. Those are my only options, on the streets people take drugs, but not everyone. I understand why they take drugs, it’s a way of escaping from your mind, but I can’t relapse.”

In some cases people feared being moved into private rental accommodation, losing another home and then ending up back on the streets – a cycle many people had repeated several times. They wanted COVID to be different, a fresh start and unfortunately, being moved into a hostel was the opposite.

“I lived in a house for 10 years, had a job. COVID changed that. I went back to them for help, they remembered, like they weren’t surprised to see me again. The familiarity was disheartening. Nothing is going to change for me.”

Aside from being placed in hostels, several people shared that the emergency accommodation they were given was unsuitable and often dirty, damp and unsafe. *“Two mice ran across my feet, it was an unused building.”*



He was my only family, my friend.
They wouldn't let me take him
with me. I was scared. I had to
give him up. Now I'm alone.

5 of 8. Family

A number of people we had conversations with spoke about the importance of family to them but this wasn't always a biological connection, they also spoke fondly of dogs who provided them with companionship and love, and friends on the street who they cared for greatly. Those who mentioned their dogs had different circumstances, one person was living with theirs in a hostel, another had to give up their dog to get into accommodation and another spoke of their grief for their beloved dog who had recently been hit by a car and passed away.

"I can't get my life back on track while I am in temporary accommodation, I had to give up my dog to stay here. I got my dog after I tried to commit suicide and he was an emotional help to me, it was hard to give him up, I don't know how much longer I can be here for now that my application to be made a priority has been declined."

"I have my dog right here with me, she's like a daughter to me."

"She wasn't a dog, she was family."

A number of people talked about their children and other family members and the difficulty of not being able to see or stay in touch with them during COVID due to the expense of phone credit and not having access to the internet as a result of services being closed.

"I'm alone, all my family's in Italy. I'm on benefit right now £80 a week, imagine spending £36 on the phone to speak to family and the rest is for food."

The accommodation where people were placed were often not suitable to have children visiting and people hoped for a time they would be able to have a safe home for their children to stay.

"I have a 5 year old daughter, I want to be there for her in her formative years but finding it difficult. I have a good relationship with my ex but I can't have her around here for days when there are drunks and people taking drugs in the corridor, this is no place for a child."

"I'm in The Passage now, trying to get a studio flat. I want my 2 daughters to be able to visit. That's the dream, I take each day as it comes. I've got a vivid picture in my head but it feels like it's going to be slow."

I was told I couldn't work while I was living in the hostel, if I did my benefits would stop. I just want to get a job and be normal again.

6 of 8. Employment or a home

A number of people spoke of being let go from their work as they were on temporary contracts or working for cash in-hand and therefore had no right to the governments furlough scheme. Many also spoke of the desire to work again but there were multiple barriers preventing them from doing this, with some people being told not to work as this will have an impact on benefits that can be claimed for housing.

“I was only on a five month contract, I was due to get a permanent one but then corona happened and now they’re shut...I’ve contacted 60 companies in the last 5 months, nobody answers. They all say sorry we don’t need staff. There are no jobs. Before Coronavirus I had to say no to people, they were always calling me about jobs.”

“I used to be a recovery worker, I was even on the board of a recovery unit. I’ve had loads of jobs, got loads of skills, used to have loads of responsibilities. I could easily work again, but it’s catch 22 as no tenancy no job, no job no tenancy.”

COVID itself has acted as the biggest barrier with the number of jobs available dramatically reduced due to businesses having to shut or reduce their staff teams. The lack of internet access to search and apply for jobs was also highlighted as well as the lack of funds to purchase suitable interview clothing or work attire if they were to get work.

“I can get jobs, but I need access to the internet and clothes for work. I can’t get internet access anymore and I need that to even ask the JobCentre for help. If I had a CSCS card I could work in construction.”

Even though many people did want to work the cost of living is too high to make it worthwhile leaving people wondering what the incentive is to work compared to remaining on benefits.

“I spoke to my boss and asked if I could have redundancy, they won’t give me it...If I wasn’t working it would be easier as benefit could pay and I could get a place, because I’m on payroll I have to pay so it’s harder to get somewhere. I wish they would do this, to me it’s more important to have a place than a job. Once I have a place I can get a job in the future.”

“I’ve got to think about things like travel and council tax to know whether it’s worth going back to work...I calculated I would have needed to earn at least £30,000 to live comfortably, there is no incentive to go back to work it’s ridiculous how much you get charged for things.”

The negative impact that not being able to work on people's mental wellbeing was evident with the lack of options causing stress and fear over ending up back living on the streets.

"If I can't get a job, I will have no money which is not good, I don't want to be back on the streets...I liked when I was in the hotel before because I had the internet, I could send emails for jobs."

I was given temporary accommodation, but I feel isolated. I was getting depressed. I'm not used to four walls, it was uncomfortable. I come out here, it's my home.

Some people told us that they wanted to stay outside when the ‘Everyone In’ policy was implemented. By staying on the streets there was a sense of familiarity, they were able to connect with people they knew and felt less isolated. People spoke of feeling cared for by those who worked or lived around them and they felt safe.

“They gave me a room in a hotel. It was miles away. I was lonely, everyone I know is here. I didn’t know what was going on, how long I was going to be there, so I came back here. It’s quieter, less noise than before.”

Many people referred to the streets as their homes. This was not seen as a positive thing, but instead, they struggled to see the benefits of moving into temporary accommodation, only to end up back where they started.

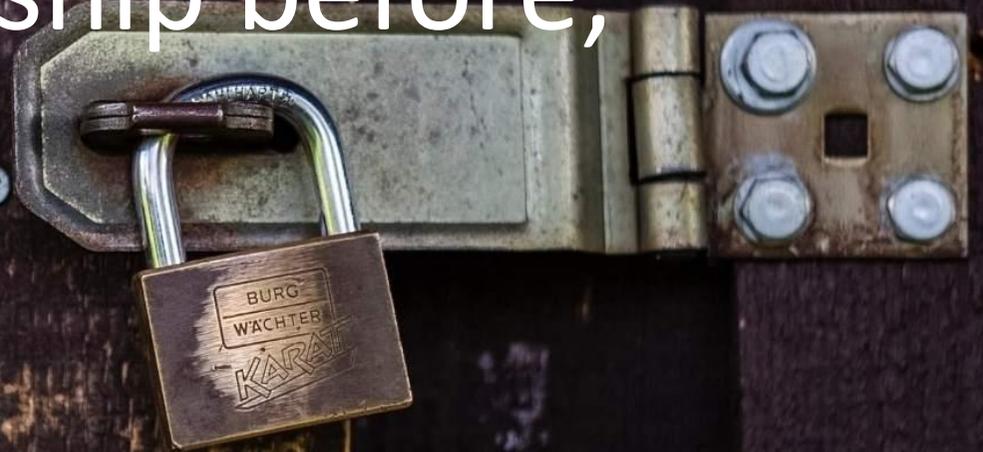
“I’m 60 years old and I’ve been sleeping on the streets for 20 years, about 10 of those years have been on this street – It’s my home. It’s what I know.”

“I do know a few people that didn’t want to go inside. Being on the street is a desperate thing, it’s not a choice.”

For many people Westminster was not their home, they had found themselves here due to not being able to access the right support in their area. People wanted to start a new life and a new identity away from the homelessness 'community'. They wanted to be seen as people, instead of homeless and to have a home, rather than a case file.

“I lived in Leicester, I was in an abusive relationship, no one would help me they said I didn’t have a local connection. I came here, they said the same. I just want a home.”

The word 'lockdown' terrified me.
I was trapped for so long in
an abusive relationship before,
it was too much.



8 of 8. Communication

The language used around the pandemic caused a lot of fear, confusion and often prejudice. It was also apparent that the communication with outreach teams throughout lockdown was hugely important, and for some was often the only direct source of help and advice.

Many people Mayday spoke to had previously experienced abusive and violent relationships, others had spent time in prison. This meant when the term lockdown was introduced people were fearful for what it meant. One woman the team spoke to share how she felt she needed to get as far away as possible, but due to her situation, she had nowhere to go. She became paranoid, avoiding her friends, and a lot of anxiety around her past experiences resurfaced.

English was not the first language for many of the people the team spoke to, leading to confusion over the key messages around the pandemic. Some people doubted the seriousness of the situation, while others were left panicked and confused. Two individuals explained that they were classified as having 'no recourse to public funds' and they had been turned away by charities.

“They say they can't help me. I worked for cash before Coronavirus, I got by. Now there's no work, they say they're not allowed to help me, there's no money.”

Messaging used by the media, government and sometimes charities meant that people often felt judged for being on the street, when in most cases people felt that it was their only option.

“They don't know how much pressure they're putting on us, how it feels. Sometimes I just want to scream – I probably could you know and no one would notice. The Government have no idea.”

On multiple occasions people shared that when they had come into contact with outreach teams they were supportive, offering help and listening to any concerns. People sympathised that teams were busy, and services were not being run as normal due to the pandemic. However, at times the lack of capacity meant misinformation was passed on or there were inconsistencies in the team connecting with people.

“They were nice, they gave me suggestions on safer places to sleep, told me where I could get a shower, a free sleeping bag, and maybe even accommodation. I thought things were going to be okay at that point.”

To Conclude

The experiences people shared with Mayday were both positive and negative. For some COVID and the response of the organisations involved had resulted in a fresh start, an opportunity for people to move on with their lives. Many people praised the work of key workers and outreach teams for doing their best in an impossible situation and offering people a human connection, reassurance and advice.

However, for many people, COVID-19 was another example of the system failing to work. People shared anger, disappointment and despair at the situation. But people weren't surprised. People expressed that feeling out of control, scared, and isolated is the norm for many people experiencing homelessness and COVID-19 didn't change anything.

One of the most common themes throughout these conversations was the difference in experience between those who stayed in hotels during lockdown and those who were moved into hostels. When people were provided with their own space, security and a bit of stability in hotels many felt able to look towards the future. Whilst people staying in hostels appeared to be exhausted and overwhelmed by their living situation, many feeling they had no choice but to return to the streets, or that it was inevitable.

We heard how people appreciated the efforts of those who work in the system, making a difference where they can and doing some great work, clearly, a huge amount of work done very suddenly when lockdown hit. Paradoxically while grateful to their key workers, many people then went on to explain what their key worker couldn't do or what they had to do (which the person often didn't want or need) because of the system, seeming to understand the rules of the system and how it restricted what was on offer.

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