

# Wisdom from the System

Capturing the voices of people who are working in or have experienced homeless, mental health, social care and criminal justice systems

**During the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 over 130 people took part in online conversations where they shared and reflected on their experiences of homelessness, social care, mental health, and criminal justice systems.**

There was an open invitation to people working in systems and those with direct experience, to come and share their thoughts. People were put into small groups and asked to answer a single question: What is your experience of systems?

These conversations were unstructured and went in many directions. Recordings were used to pick out the key themes from what was said. These themes have been captured in this document, Wisdom from the System.

This was a deep listening exercise to capture the voices of individuals who often go unheard and to uncover the reality of the systems people encounter when going through a tough time. It is hoped that these 10 Wisdoms can be used to inform positive and sustainable systems change.

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"All I needed all along was to be treated like a human."

**1 of 10 Systems are not working for people**



People shared that when they entered the system, they were rarely listened to. Instead, conversations were focussed on the identification of what their perceived problems were, with the aim of fitting people into predetermined boxes to receive standardised offers of support.

There was little interest in exploring what people could do for themselves and the offer of choice was limited or non-existent. The insight people had over their situations was ignored, stripped of the opportunity to lead based on what they knew they needed. Instead, professionals would assume that they knew best, trying to fix and focus on the problem and not on the person.

*"If someone is drinking to cope with childhood trauma, working on abstinence is never going to work."*

People felt that they were no longer treated as people, but as a label or the sum of the multiple labels, they received to gain entry to the system in the first place.



" Just because the standard support offer doesn't work for someone, it doesn't mean they don't exist. Everyone has a right to be heard."

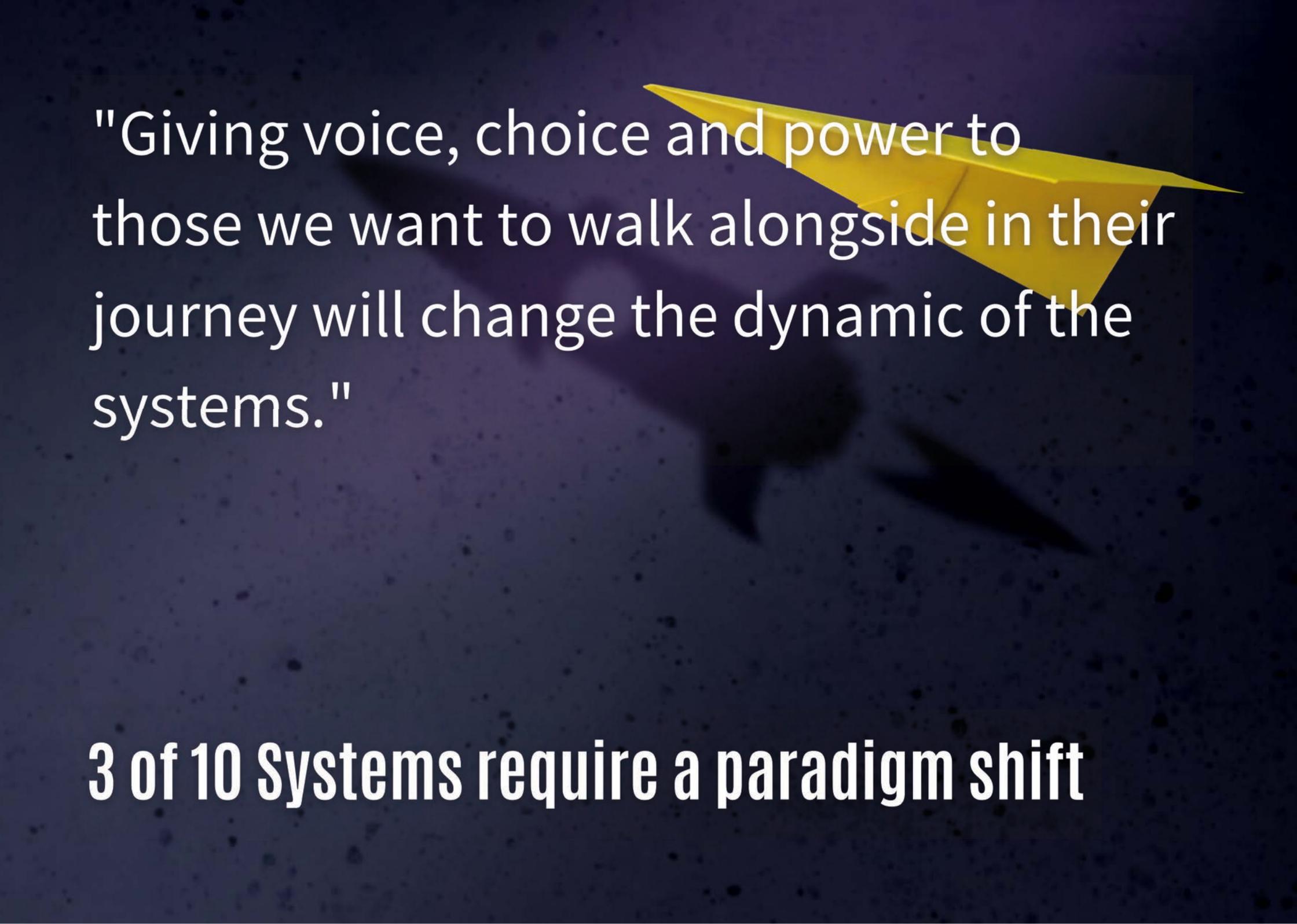
**2 of 10 Systems that aren't accessible to whole communities**

People explained that whilst the system isn't working for the majority, there are also whole communities who go unseen and prevented from entering the system at all.

The current system treats people as a standardised group, providing generic service offers and applying blanket policies. By doing so, many people go unseen, muting the voices of those who are LGBTQ+, women, people of colour, differently-abled and from different cultures.

As a result, some communities receive very little or no support at all as they go through some of the toughest of times. The system continues to fail to acknowledge the discrimination and harm it causes by not recognising the multi-faceted society that exists.

*"During the Covid-19 pandemic, I could only find one Local Authority that had a women-only space available for women who were sleeping rough. Many women endured the added trauma of mixed accommodation during lockdown."*



"Giving voice, choice and power to those we want to walk alongside in their journey will change the dynamic of the systems."

**3 of 10 Systems require a paradigm shift**

People described how the focus on systems change is often more about improving the system that we currently have, as opposed to whole systems change, the paradigm shift that is urgently needed.

A system that focusses on 'complex needs' and medicalising people's trauma increases the number of people who are deemed in need of state support; the system cannot respond to this growing figure and has become overwhelmed. People's lives are more closely monitored and managed, stripping individuals of their agency and right to choose.

The system has responded by streamlining services, bringing silos closer together, asking criminal justice to talk to health and homelessness services. Innovations have been brought in to try and make the system more efficient and effective. The increase in the number of 'navigators' and new interventions is an indication of the complexity of what exists for people.

The system continues to cause harm and haemorrhage money, so the aim must be a paradigm shift, to a response which allows for individual control and choice. An environment where energies are focussed on people rather than trying to mend a system that cannot be fixed.

"There are a lot of so called 'vulnerable people' but no one asks why. If they do, they blame the person for their situation, not poverty or injustice."

Disorder

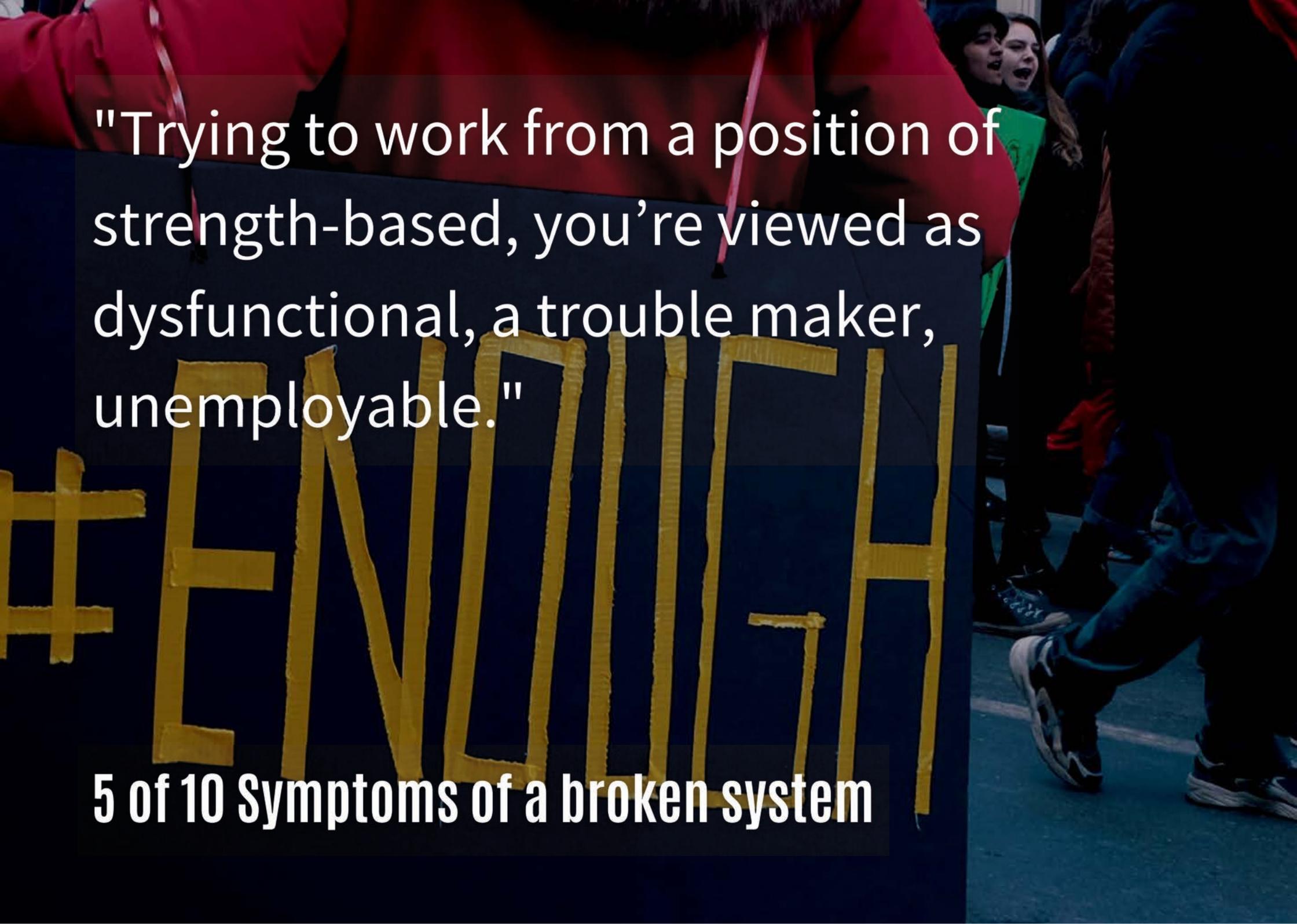
**4 of 10 Systems focus on individual problems distracts from structural failure**

People shared the inherent control that they experienced when accessing services where they felt ‘cared for’ rather than ‘cared about’.

A ‘them and us’ culture is present that means people are managed, controlled and penalised for not engaging with presented solutions that may not work for them. Trying to get people to engage, rather than listening to what might work overrides the necessity for services to provide person-led responses.

A huge amount of time and effort is placed on managing things like anti-social behaviour in shared housing without exploring or understanding the context behind people’s reactions. Everyone reaches a tipping point of frustration at times, for example, if someone is stealing food from the fridge, the answer isn’t to install a lock and label people as anti-social, it requires a wider reflection on whether shared housing is the right environment for people in the first place.

By continuing to focus on fixing people and failing systems, we are distracted from the real issues of poverty, social injustice, a lack of safe, secure housing, the right to work with fair conditions and the right to understand our situation without a label, diagnosis or fix.

A person wearing a red hoodie is holding a dark blue protest sign. The sign has the text "#ENDSILENCE" written in large, yellow, hand-drawn letters. The background shows a crowd of people, some with their mouths open as if shouting or chanting. The scene appears to be outdoors during a protest or demonstration.

"Trying to work from a position of strength-based, you're viewed as dysfunctional, a trouble maker, unemployable."

**5 of 10 Symptoms of a broken system**

People explained how the damage caused by systems isn't exclusively experienced by those accessing services, but also by those who work within them.

People told us how they felt unable to continue to work in jobs where people were not treated as people and where culture and practice went against their core values. Not being able to provide what people told them they needed, or to be able to listen and respond led to them feeling compromised and having to work in a way that they felt wasn't right.

Those who challenged the norm and tried to uphold the values of strength-based work, were labelled as trouble makers and were often dismissed as not understanding what people needed.

Someone described having conversations with others with similar experiences which felt like 'coming in from the cold'.

"The system only values what you can measure. A response designed with humanity and relationships at the heart simply cannot fit."

**6 of 10 Systems accountable for money  
not to people**



People shared how the process of New Public Management has commoditised people's lives, reducing them to a set of outcomes that can be traded for income.

A system that requires commissioners and funders to be answerable to government and local authorities for public funds relies on the management, control and collection of data. The impact of this on people within the system often goes unrecognised as their situations, experiences and lives are categorised for the benefit of the system rather than being flexibly responded to in ways that work for them.

Box ticking featured in many conversations where people felt that the system commoditised people's pain and tried to fix their problems. Their successes and failures were then hijacked as currency by organisations or statutory bodies to either draw down more funds or account for funds that had been received.

Accountability and money sit with organisations and funders, not with the individual, as they would if a person accessed counselling or therapeutic support. This creates a system where the individual holds the least power.

The question is raised as to whether the state-funded and deficit focused system can work at all.

"Imagine if we solved homelessness, criminal justice, mental health - a lot of people would be out of a job!"

**CLOSED**

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**7 of 10 Systems that serve themselves**

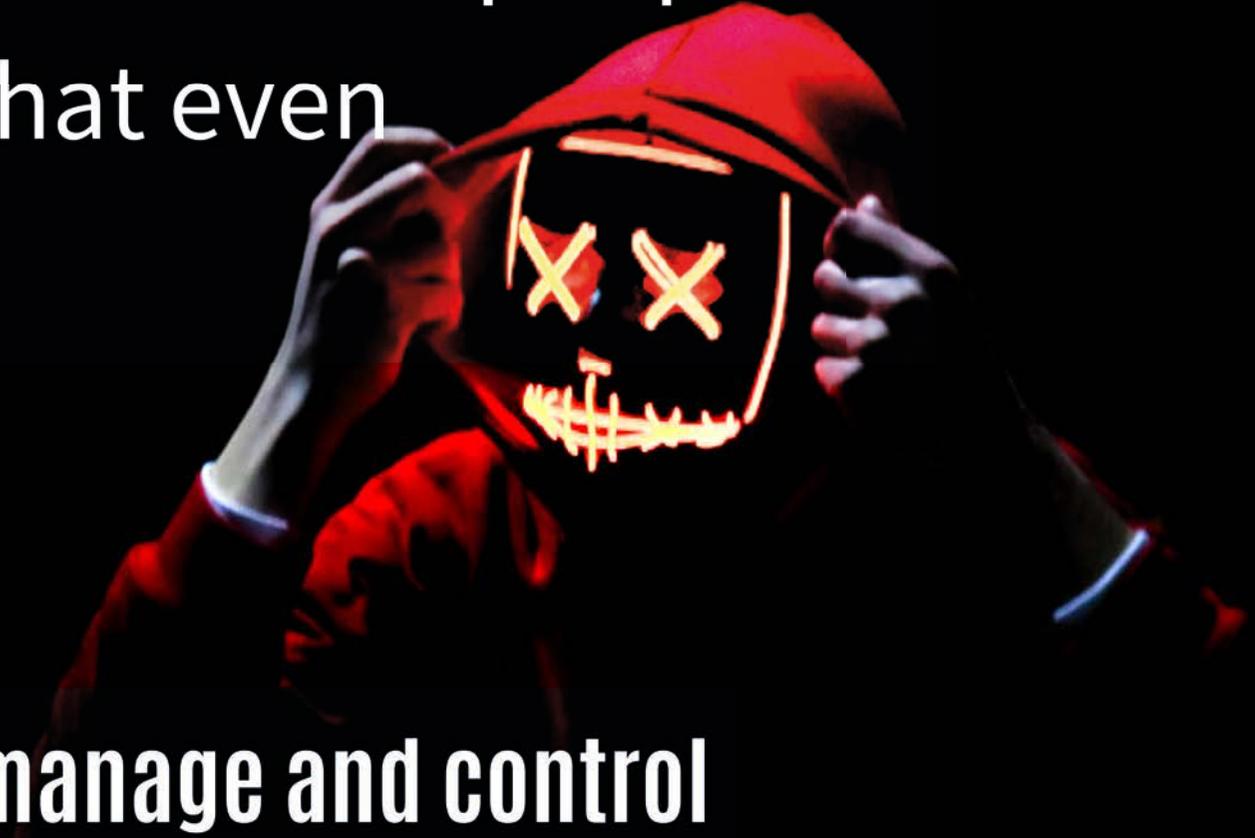
Many people talked of ‘vested’ interests in maintaining the current systems. Some intentional, some through misdirection, or belief that the system is working, or it is too hard or too overwhelming to change.

The system is served by people having to declare themselves as ‘problems’ to get any level of support they might need to get through a tough time. What they actually need may be so much less than the weight of the interventions and ‘wrap-around’ services smothering them.

People described a ‘survival for survival’s sake’ mentality among many working in what was described as ‘industries of poverty and trauma’.

People talked about how embedded the current narrative, culture and thinking was for individuals, as well as organisations and the government. Few people, even those with the best of intentions, could see past the current norm to a different and better person-led system.

"COVID-19 laid systems bare. You became aware of where the political levers lie - everyone in and people said 'REALLY, is that even possible?'..."



**8 of 10 Systems that manage and control**

People explained that with the Covid-19 pandemic affecting everyone UK wide, it was often the first time many people encountered the system and experienced having their lives managed.

People have responded in different ways to this new situation. Some have been compliant and grateful for the wider response, even taking on the role of trying to be helpful. Others have rebelled against the restrictions and repeatedly broke the rules. It is apparent, that whatever the response, no one is really happy with having their lives managed.

It has highlighted how rigidly the lives of those who are within homeless, mental health, criminal justice and social care systems are so closely managed and controlled, as opposed to others who live outside of such systems.

Practitioners who worked in a genuine person-led way shared: *"Only being able to communicate via phone has led to some very short and sometimes uncomfortable conversations and this left me feeling that I am 'not doing enough'. On reflection, the people I am working with seem happy with the level of communication they are receiving and appreciate the contact. This has caused me to reflect on who I am doing things for, is it about them or about me and how I feel?"*

For many, the Covid-19 pandemic has been the first time they have been housed unconditionally and they have been able to manage well without the mandatory 'engagement' with support. It poses the question, 'do we need to move toward more human rights led approaches as opposed to support driven models?'

"It's about trust. Trusting people to know what they need, and it's very rarely more services. Why don't we just LISTEN!"



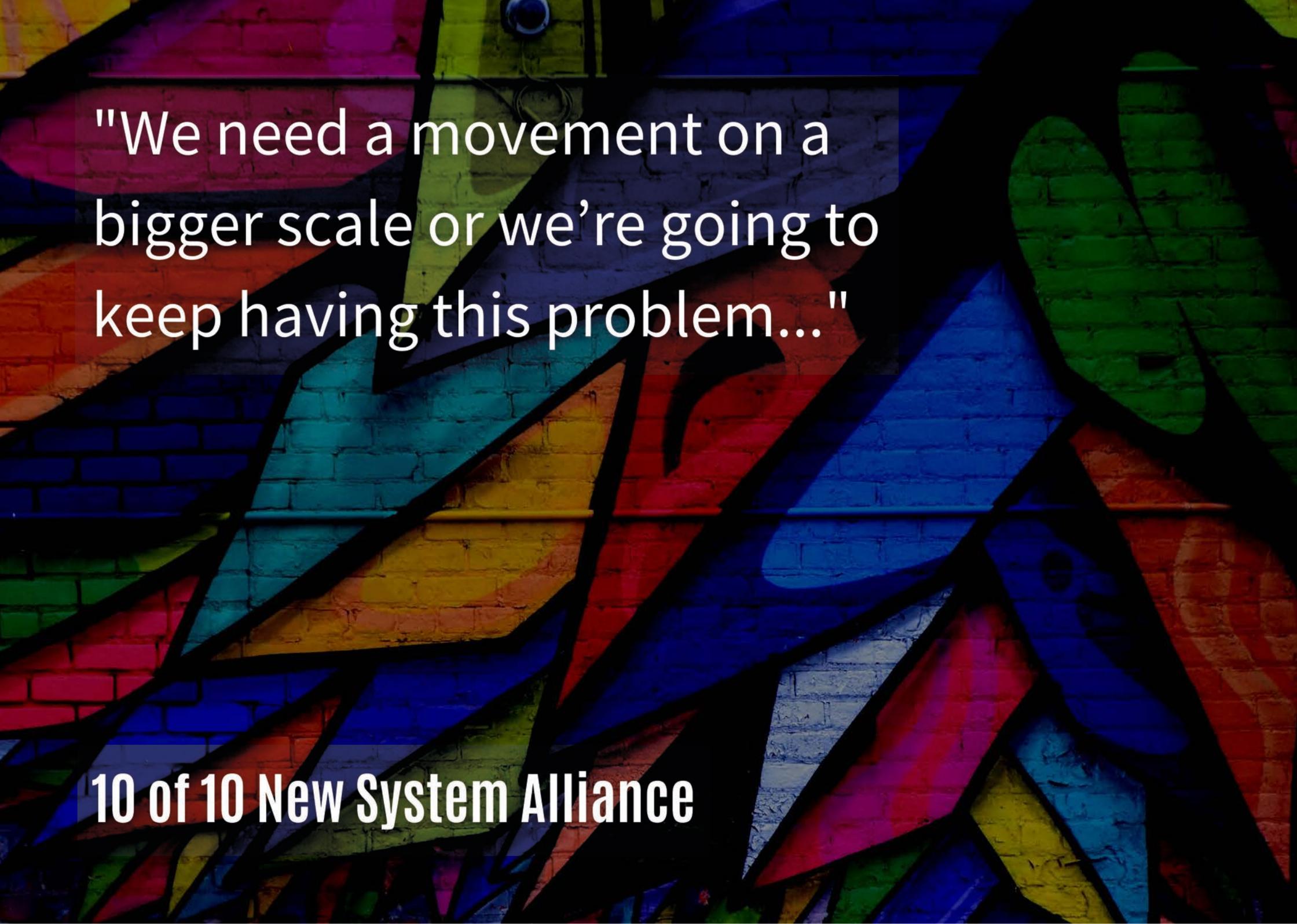
**9 of 10 Systems in need of compassion**

Many people reflected upon how, when they began their work in charities and support services, they treated people as names and numbers to place into accommodation when it became available, rather than listening to what each person wanted or needed. The response was often to label the individual as ungrateful if the offer was questioned or not taken up. Seeing people as 'mentally unwell' or 'homeless' with a need to be housed or treated, created a massive imbalance in power and an inherent culture of mistrust.

Taking away people's ability to inform their way out of a situation and assuming mistrust, led to many people having to give up their agency and having to bear the brunt of the system.

*"A loved one had passed away, so I had some money and I explained to them that I wanted to rent somewhere but they said no, wait and get on the council list, but I didn't want to wait and I knew I wouldn't have a choice where I was offered. I was a carer for my parents so I needed to live near them. So I said 'No I really think I could rent a property' but I had to get kicked out of the hostel before I could rent. If someone had listened, I would have said just tell me how I go about renting a property and I will be out of your hair in a few hours."*

This approach means that people are not listened to and are sucked into a system that doesn't respond to their individual situation and ability to bypass the system in the first place.



"We need a movement on a bigger scale or we're going to keep having this problem..."

**10 of 10 New System Alliance**

*"I don't want to still be discussing this in ten years' time."*

People shared their frustration with the slow pace of change. That the same conversations have been going on for years with no real systemic change happening on a bigger scale. People felt that they were often a lone voice and that bringing about the change that is needed can be difficult alone. Although others may feel the same way, there is nowhere to bring this together.

There is a growing number of individuals thinking the same, being brave, experimenting and trying different things that are more human and person-led, but these are happening in fragmented ways as dispersed pockets of difference. It was felt that by only hearing and operating in silos, we are losing the power of a collective voice.

We would have a much bigger voice if we join this up, focus on humans and take our experiences to where it needs to be heard. Through bringing together the experiences, voices and examples of difference together, by collectively 'doing something' change may finally be possible.

# NEW SYSTEM ALLIANCE

Person-led • Transitional • Strength-based



The New System Alliance hopes to provide a platform for those who have felt there is something wrong with the current systems encountered by people experiencing tough times. It acts as a home for the frustrated, unheard or invisible. This is an opportunity to listen, to be heard and to 'do something' together to bring about total systems change, a paradigm shift, where people can take control and together, we can respond in a new way to finally make the systems work for people.

The New System Alliance has been created by Mayday Trust, Changing Lives, Homeless Network Scotland and Patfform in Wales and was made possible thanks to the support of The National Lottery Community Fund.

**To find out more visit [www.newsysteemalliance.org](http://www.newsysteemalliance.org)**

*New System Alliance is founded by Mayday Trust and Partners. Mayday Trust is a charity and company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales. Charity Registration Number: 1035524 Company Registration Number: 2911222*