



Reflections on System Leadership

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Over many years, the role of the Housing LIN has become that of a unifying, independent, body providing a unique approach to support, events and advice across it's regions.

Within the Housing LIN, the role of the Leadership Sets has been to provide a focus, not only for input around events and papers, but to help define where the LIN might go for the future – the regional strategy.

For the South West LIN, these simple statements resolved to a goal around helping the housing sector to change (and to thrive), in a world where the public services so crucial to many housing providers, are stretched further than ever.

How exactly a small group of people can achieve that ambitious goal has proved a far more complex problem! Rather than being discouraged by the struggle, the Housing LIN's South West Leadership Set recently had the privilege of time with Belinda Weir, of the Health Services Management Centre at the University of Birmingham. This broad, brief but inspiring meeting, helped clarify why this had been such a challenge and what the journey to resolving it might involve – and there was to be no easy solution.

The challenge may best be explained by I bit of reflective analysis: If we were to start with a person and build up to their needs and desires, and how to meet them, it is almost incredulous to think that we would end up with a system whereby their underlying biological needs around food and hygiene would be separated on a multitude of levels, from good health and managing illness/disease It becomes even more ridiculous to imagine either or both would be separated from the environment in which that person exists. To then overlay each of these components with discrete and often incompatible requirements and measurements of success would be stretching credibility and frankly, ludicrous. And yet that is what we have to deal with – health, social care and housing all have their own high level aims, and process that, despite years of intention and rhetoric, often work in direct opposition and exclusion to each other.

Belinda's talk helped us confirm that taking a high-profile, "heroic-commander" approach would inevitably, and at best, only solve just one area and likely only for a brief period. In contrast, the more comfortable and *easy-to-make-a-business-case-for* "process management" approach, will invariably be confined to one small component at a time in order to prove its own effectiveness, impact and value.

The real key is to realise that both will be of limited value, as the complex system we work in, like so many, has an embedded, institutional homeostasis/autopoesis – like a waterbed, as you push down on one part, it expands everywhere else until you stop pushing, when it quickly bounces back to its original state.

This is the perfect exemplar of a “wicked” problem for everyone. Making it personal, means that for the Social Housing sector and the Housing LIN’s Leadership Set we will require a true “system leadership” approach, not to think we can ‘solve’ it, but to accept it, reframe it, challenge that which gets in the way and manage/tackle the parts we can whilst keeping an eye on a shared, wider goal.

Bizarrely whilst this provided some insight for the Leadership Set, the clarity was around realising and affirming that this was not a task confined to the Leadership Set, but for everyone associated with the LIN and then, far wider. If the Leadership Set has a role at this time it may well be to help all our contacts across the South West embrace that this has to be their role as well.

Whilst the high level goal of a unified, truly-holistic approach to partnership and provision often *seems* unattainable, the role of everyone who aspires to lead, is to accept how complex and ‘wicked’ this is as a problem, but we need to forever hold on to that high level aim and share it.

Building a new, sustainable and positive future for the sector (and wider) is a complex problem, a “wicked” one and there is almost certainly no ‘answer’. We concluded by wondering if our role as the Leadership Set was merely (but also critically important) to help others understand, live and work with that idea and help them live within it. Then we may all be able to begin the open-mindedness and conviction to work at those parts we can affect and to allow ourselves to let others take the recognition (if they need to).

As a first step, if you get a chance, listen to Belinda, get to understand (and maybe reassured) why it often feels so difficult, remember the common shared aim and share it further. And if you don’t seem to succeed – accept that that never completing the task was almost inevitable, but hold on to where you did make a difference.

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