

The purpose of self-directed support is to liberate people from old systems and to offer people new options for creativity and community life. This all sounds very good. But how do you really design a new system that genuinely creates the changes you want to see? This is not such an easy challenge.

Steve Jobs once said: “To design something really well, you have to get it. You have to really get what it's all about. It takes a passionate commitment to really thoroughly understand something, chew it up, not just quickly swallow it. Most people don't take the time to do that.”

He also said: “Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.”

These thoughts are important, because ultimately self-directed support is only a tool. Its effectiveness should be measured by how it is used. It is not the system that does the work of citizenship: helping your neighbour, learning new skill, getting a job, loving your family or doing any of the other important stuff of life.

A good system doesn't do the work - it just makes a little bit easier for us to do the work.

So if we want to make it easier for people to have a good life then we need to think hard about how to create systems that work well and which are flexible and simple enough to work well for lots of different people in lots of different situations. We also need to make the system work for the government and the tax payer; it needs to be efficient, affordable and attractive for the long-run.

You want people to want the change.

We are still learning how to do this well. Although there has been 50 years of work in developing systems of self-directed support there is still no perfect model. The bad news is that you cannot just lift a good system off a shelf and apply it to Finland. The good news is that a country that loves good design can use its own talents and learn from those who've gone before you.

I cannot cover all the things you need to think about in this short blog, and I've written about some of these things elsewhere in more detail, for instance check out:

Architecture for Personalisation [<https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/architecture-for-personalisation.html>]

Travelling Hopefully [<https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/travelling-hopefully.html>]

Self-Directed Support [<https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/selfdirected-support2.html>]

Self-Directed Support for service Providers [<https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/selfdirected-support-service-providers.html>]

But here are 3 principles you should try and remember:

1. Make it easy for people to be creative

People can only be creative if they know what they've got to play with:

- If you give me control but then don't tell me what budget then how can I be creative with that budget?
- If you tell me your system is flexible, but in fact there are lots of rules and restrictions then why would I risk making any changes?
- If you tell me that my budget is public money and that if I save money then the savings must come back to the government why will I save any money or find a more efficient solution?

If this is a system to support people to be citizens then we'd better make sure that we treat people like they are citizens to begin with, with all the freedoms, rights and responsibilities to make that citizenship real.

2. Professionals are people too

The problem with the old system was not the professionals who worked in it. Almost everyone working in social services wants to do a good job, wants to be creative, supportive and to be an equal partner. But professionals end up adjusting to systems that are institutional and controlling and soon it can appear that they are the problem - not the system.

We need professionals who want to make self-directed support work. We need them to encourage and nurture other people's creativity. We need them to take on tasks for people when they can't do them for themselves. We need them to connect people to their peers, to their communities and to other good professionals.

Create a system that brings out the best in professionals and sets them up to succeed.

3. Efficiency matters, so make it so everyone benefits

Most bad system design comes about by assuming that self-directed support needs to be cheaper than the old system and by trying to create efficiencies by cheating: reducing salaries for the poorest paid workers or making people and families do a professional's work for free. You can create some savings like this - but in the end you only end up undermining the system itself.

People become defensive and refuse to play the game.

The real efficiencies of self-directed support do not come about by pushing salaries down or by burdening families. The efficiencies come from enabling people to invest in their own communities, in their own lives and in supports that really work for them. This does change how money is used, but it does not exploit people.

Create a system where everyone is treated fairly and where everyone understand the rules. Ensure everyone can benefit from improvements and savings.

And one final observation. Steve Jobs was only selling us a product. We are doing something much more interesting - we are working out how to live together in a spirit of inclusion and equality. This is not just a technical issue.

So if you are involved in trying to create better systems for Finland or in your region or in your municipality then treat this work as a matter of public concern. There are obviously going to be tensions and differences of opinion. But ultimately everyone in Finland needs you to succeed in creating systems that mean everyone in Finland can play their full part as an equal citizen. So talk together, debate and use the evidence of your early testing to find out what helps and what doesn't help.

Designing better systems to advance citizenship is also the work of citizenship.