Service blueprints as building blocks for developing complex care support

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Introduction

Good services need to be designed. We are all familiar with the services we receive in shops, the websites we use and the hospitality we receive at cafes and restaurants. A good experience, like having the right information, being treated fairly or getting value for money, were all designed.

The part of a service that a customer sees is just the surface but there is much more behind it and how it works. Services that work seamlessly are underpinned by research, testing and analysis to ensure they deliver. A variety of different methods or tools are used for this purpose.

The services that we deliver at SJOG are no different. We spend time designing them so they suit the needs of the people we support. Service blueprinting is one method we use to do this. In this paper we describe the approach and how we have used it to unpick the complex care we offer to people who are homeless or subject to modern day slavery and trafficking.

What is a service blueprint?

A service blueprint is a visual tool used to analyse existing services or specify a well-defined concept for a new one. The aim of the blueprint is to map out the entire process of service delivery by listing all the activities that happen at each stage. It also details the different roles involved and highlights both the actions the user (or person we support) and the ones that happen in the back-office (back stage). They are used as a guide to see which parts of the service can be modified to improve the overall impact it has.

Blueprints help visualise services in different parts (see figure 1). The x axis of the blueprint shows the service over time. This time can be divided into lifecycles and journeys. The lifecycle will be the end to end experience of the service. A typical structure is before, during and after. The journey, on the other hand, is the story of how the people we support experience a service which can only be a part of the bigger lifecycle. It describes how the individual transitions through the stages of the support they receive. In other words how they make use of it. There can be many different support journeys within a service and they focus on specific parts of the support needs during that time.

Figure 1 – Service blueprint elements. "People" represent the people we support and the "objects", "infrastructure" and "systems" represent the back end functions that support service delivery.
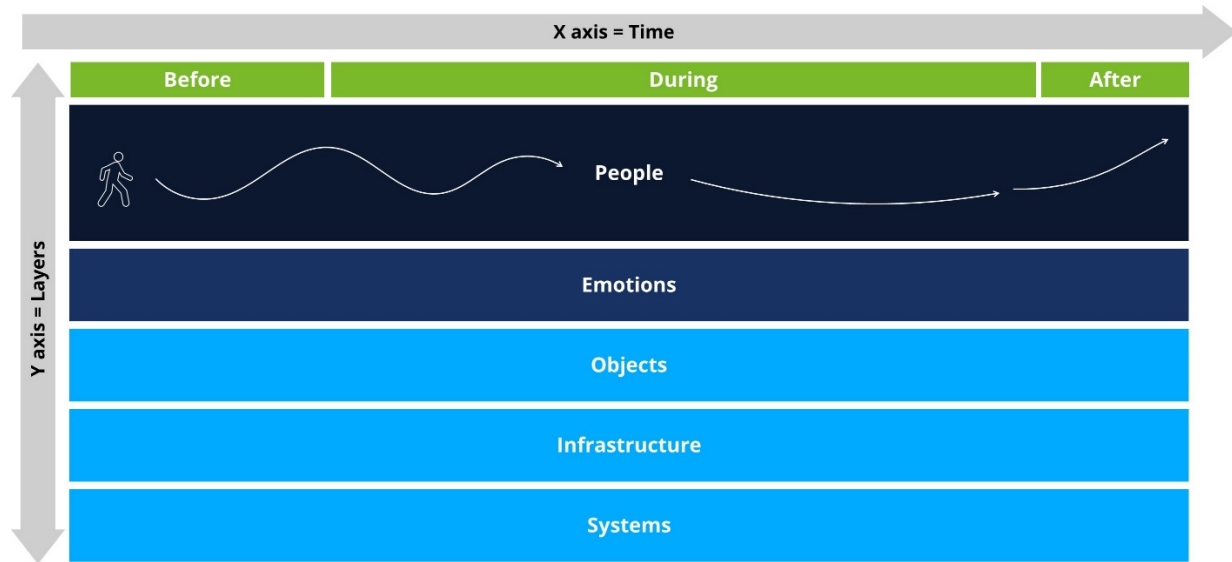
Lifecycles and support journeys facilitate the understanding of what the people we support experience, how a service meets their needs, and helps design improvements to these.

The y axis are the different layers of the service. The most important are people. These are defined as anyone who is performing a role within the service ether using it or delivering it. Roles can be performed by human beings or other types of entities (organisations, departments, computers, or machines, etc.) Usually each individual/role will have its own layer with their specific actions.

Other layers that can be added to a blueprint depends on the aim of the blueprint. For example if you want to understand the different emotions, a layer representing these emotions can be added. Another layer might be physical evidence/objects that can be designed to assist the journey. An example of this is a digital platform where a service user can do an online registration or access relevant information for the service experience. The registration process is what we would define as a service touchpoint and the digital platform plus the devices where it is held, are the objects that support this part of the journey. Intervening or designing the objects in a human centred way for a specific touchpoint in the journey, can make the service and the user experience better.

One of the aims of blueprinting was to map out in detail the different stages in our services and the different functions that support delivery. This is particularly important where we are interested in replicating services, we have a model to work from to discuss with funder, partners and other stakeholders. It helps make a concept understandable along with identifying areas for improvement or development.

How is the blueprint done?

Service blueprints are an outcome of an open ended and qualitative research process. A series of methods were used to build the blueprints for SJOG services. The qualitative research can be used to compliment quantitative or desk research and provide another perspective to it.

The first method we used involved detailed observations (or ethnographic research). Through observation we get a sense of how the service works, who is involved and their roles, where it takes place, interactions between the people involved, objects and setting. With observation you can understand the life cycle, the many service layers and some of the support journeys that happen within it.

The second research method used structured conversations with the people involved in the services - our colleagues and the people we support. This meant giving them space to tell their story, to describe what they do day to day, the tasks they perform within the service, who they support or get support from.

Conversations are very important. This is where we get detailed, human-centred research, insights covering feelings, desires and thoughts, and impact of the service on outcomes for the people we support.

When reviewing our homeless service Olallo House, we spoke mostly with case workers, volunteers and the service manager. Due to the nature of the service, getting directly involved with the people we support takes time, and it takes time to build trust among the people we support. As a result our colleagues who work most closely with them represented their voice.

Our third method reviewed written and printed materials from the services. This involved mapping processes into the blueprint and acknowledging the standardised processes that make up support along with those that that related to working with partners and funders.

Blueprinting our homeless support service

A blueprint for Ollallo House, one of the most complex services SJOG operates, was completed. Olallo House is in central London and offers accommodation and specialist client-focused support to street homeless men and women. Clients to the service include migrants, victims of modern-day slavery / trafficking, TB patients and homeless people on discharge from hospital – non-UK and UK nationals, all deemed vulnerable due to a range of factors which may also include substance misuse and poor mental and/or physical health.

The blueprint focused on health placements (residents going though tuberculosis, HVI or hepatitis C treatments). This blueprint was done with the input of our service manager and colleagues in case worker roles. Observations and conversations at Olallo House took place over a two month period.

The blueprinting processes yields a huge amount of detail and a blueprint that is too big to fit into this paper. Figure 2 shows the high level blueprint. We've included some snapshots of the more detailed blueprint in figure 3.

Lifecycle = Period of trasitions

Before	During	After

People we support
Front line staff - SJOG team
Partners

Health placements or MDS/T placements by referrals

Assesments

Welcome to Olallo House

Individual journey plan support activities and follow-ups

Settling in and day to day activities

Specific health treatments (TB, HVI, Hep C)

Access to external health services

Migration and settlement status processes

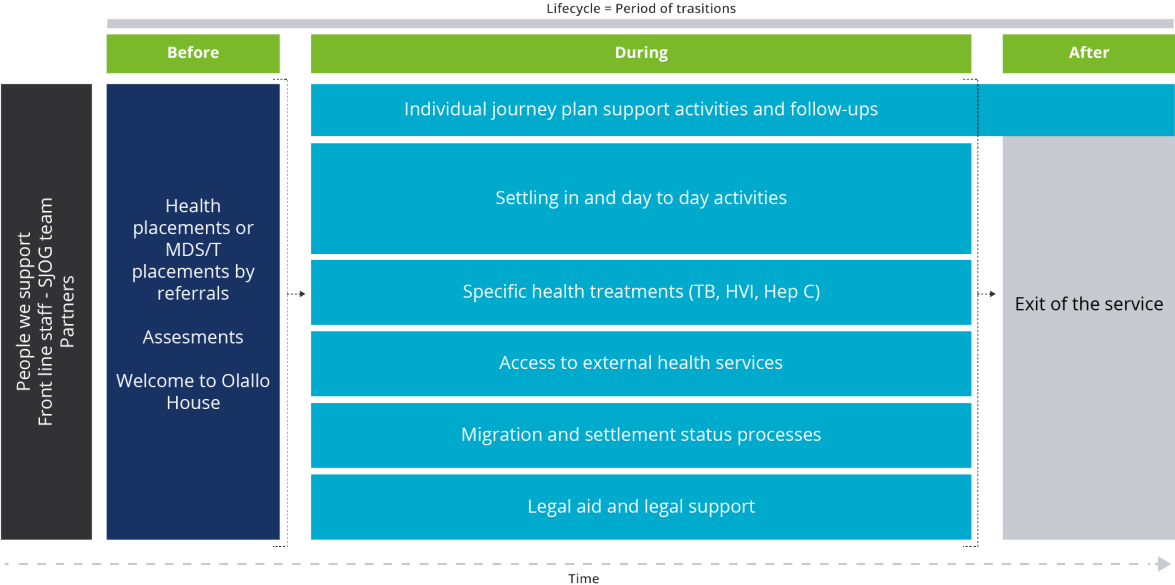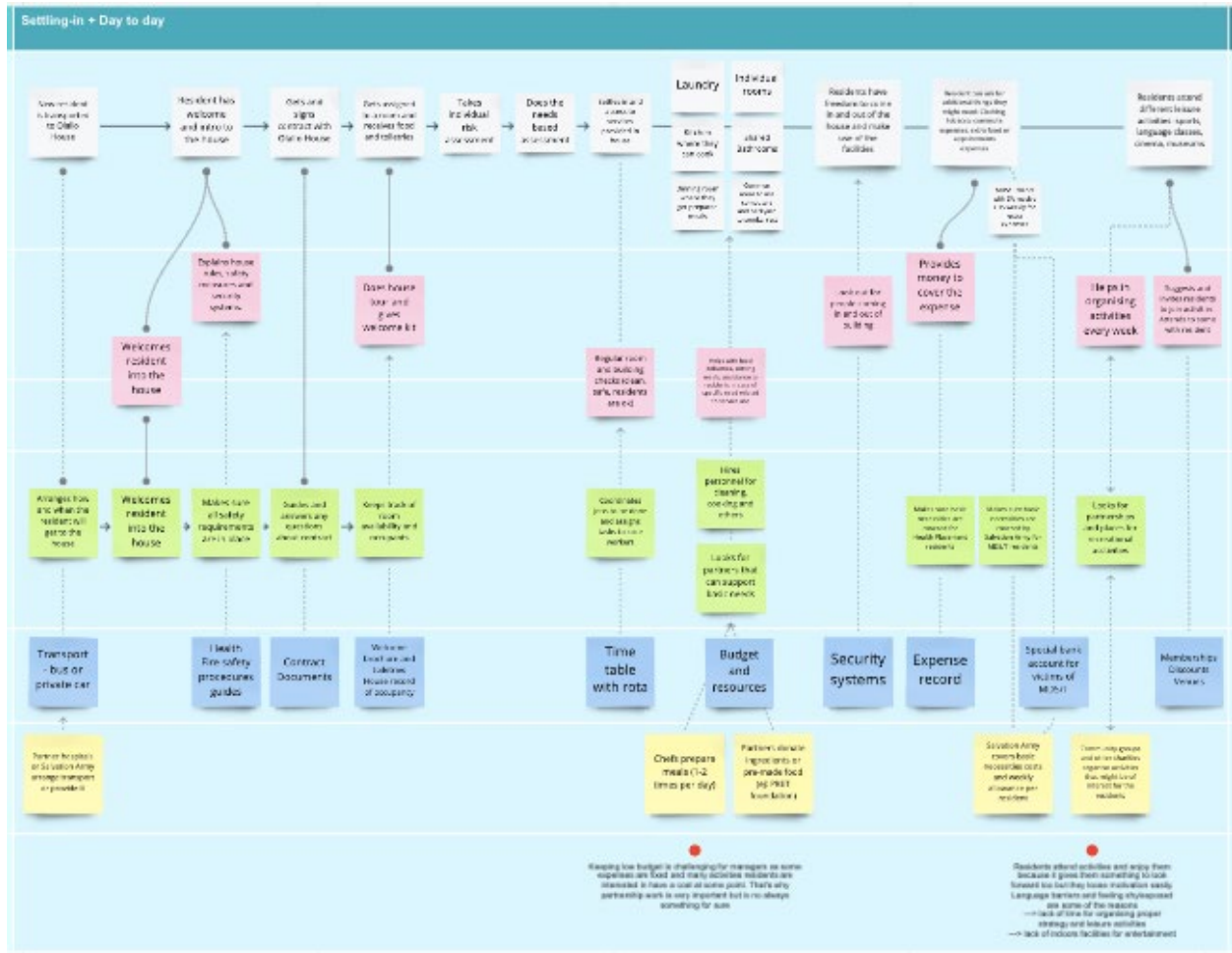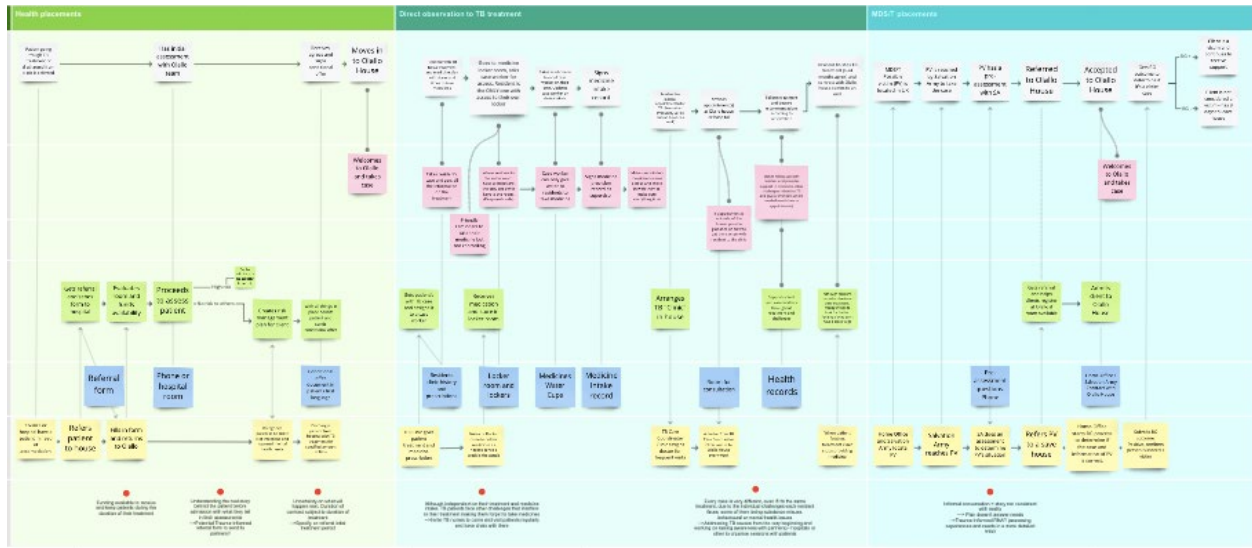Legal aid and legal support

Exit of the service

Time

Figure 3 – Segments of Olallo House Blueprint

The process was fruitful in identifying roadblocks and challenges. These don't necessarily stop the service from functioning but by going through them it allows opportunities for improvement to emerge. We've detailed some of these below:

Getting to know the person we support

The service manager and case workers emphasised in the fact that understanding the person's story is one of the key elements to be able support and allows the creation of a bespoke and relevant support plan. One of the challenges they encounter is the referral stage Information is limited, leading to an initial plan that doesn't necessarily answer the needs of the person supported on a first stage. As many clients come with traumatic experiences it takes time to build trust with our colleagues. This means that the development of a clear direction for the individual takes time and a challenge is ensuring this is achieved while funding is in place.

Mental health

Mental health is one of the areas that deals with most uncertainty within the service. It also became apparent from the blueprinting process that external support from agencies can be hit and miss depending on the status of the individual (e.g. if they are classed as no recourse to public funds). Coupled with other issues such as substance misuse means there is the need for breadth of support on offer. This has highlighted the need to develop a trauma-informed care approach which provides a consistent structure across service provision.

Time

One of the aspects that makes the service complex is the time for each individual's journey. SJOG services are a stepping stone or transition period but the time it takes varies according to need, legal status and personal development progress. In the case of health placements for example, treatments have a duration determined by the clinic. Once the treatment is completed, people have to move to an alternative provided. However, from a personal development perspective they need more support to overcome other challenges that come with their lived experiences.

Funding

Attached to time is the funding available for certain clients. As much as case workers and managers want to help the people we support for longer periods of time, sometimes is hard to find additional funding to keep them well and within the service. This is prevalent in the case of the health placements which usually need additional partners to continue once they finish their health treatment.

Legal aid

Through blueprinting we understood several processes that make part of the service. Providing legal aid to the people we support proves very valuable, since this is one of the

areas where they need the most help, yet an important gap has been identified. One of the reasons for this is case workers spend a lot of time finding solicitors or legal support with little or no success and they are not qualified to give this advice themselves. Another reason is that individual processes are never the same and they have specific requirements and complications. The fact that some of the people we support are classed as no recourse to public funds puts some barriers to this process too.

The blueprint not only highlights the roadblocks and challenges but for a service like Olallo House, it also raises awareness of different factors and variables that make the service work and are not necessarily standardised. These are some observations about the service:

- The service is not prescriptive. Although the service has a clear structure and defined processes to cover the needs of the people we support, there are a lot variables for each individual journey. Also, our colleagues do additional work that cannot be systemised but we can learn from them and try to fit them within the bigger service lifecycle. One of the most valuable aspects of the service is the willingness of colleagues to go the extra mile, solve things that are not usually within their job requirements and can be unexpected. An example of this is a case worker providing English language support in their own time.

- Intangible aspects of the service. In the care sector and taking Olallo House as an example, we can see that there is a human aspect that gives richness to the service experience. The service has a very important emotional component that is unpredictable and not something that is easily measured but highlighting it on the blueprint helps us understand which steps of the process can have extra attention and also highlighting the learning from experience. For example our colleagues put a lot of effort into making people feel like home and creating a safe space where they have freedom to develop their own life. It has to be welcoming and friendly, but it is still a professional environment, so there's a fine line to keep in order to be structured and able to operate such a complex service.

- Community spirit in the house. Building a sense of community is a theme that has been getting attention across the organisation. The benefits of having a sense of belonging and a group of individuals to trust and share are important for the journeys and achieving individual goals. By observing the service we realised this is not implied in the day to day running of Olallo House. It can be an area to explore and expand in the service provision, but is this something the people we support are interested in? Can it help them get something to look forward to and motivate them in their personal development journey?

- Defining a better exit path. When mapping out the processes we can visualise the end to end experience (life cycle) of the service. Olallo House is a service where the people

we support are going through a significant transition in their life, but outcomes are unpredictable for each case and some of the risks can be relapses in mental health issues, homelessness or substance misuse within others. As part of the social responsibility we have for the people we support, the ideal scenario would be avoiding some of this risks, but after exiting our services it's hard to keep track or extend the support provided. Therefore we can raise a question on how can we help in the transition out of the service and after?

Outcomes and uses of blueprinting

The blueprint has a number of outcomes and uses by colleagues depending on their objectives or tasks.

Firstly, from an organisational perspective, blueprints are useful to understand the operation and structure of the services offered. The nature of support at Olallo is complex due to the different referral partners and funding streams that support people. There are many things happening at the same time making it challenging to identify where the opportunities lie to improve or change. With the blueprints we can have a detailed view of processes and people involved, and a guide to replicate the service or part of the service. As a team we can identify the possibilities to make it more efficient either through process changes or cost changes. By having the visual support is also easy to consider the whole system around the service and it gives perspective that one change can have repercussions on different areas too.

Blueprints can also be a tool to pitch proposals to partners and funders. They show structure in a visual way and open a space for conversation. For example replicating a complex service like Olallo House needs not only the basic processes shown on the blueprint (refer to Olallo blueprint). This specific case has a lot of variables to be taken into consideration like the human capital and experience and dealing with uncertainty even if the service is well structured.

The blueprint can provide colleagues with insights of where they should be working together, where they are using their time the most and where it can be use more effectively to provide better support to people. Identifying common roadblocks and developing solutions for them are of particular use. It means that as all the elements of the service are mapped out, any change to one process can be simulated with knock on effects explored. As this is a visual tool it also aids conversation as everyone can be involved with a consistent focus to improvement meetings.

There are also some more general uses for the blueprints to promote team work and creativity. We can also use them to see where new initiatives can fit, like the informed care model. By understanding how the service works it is easier to identify where some

interventions can be applied to introduce elements from a new model without changing the things that are in place and are already working. This is particularly good for ensuring the context is considered when developing new initiatives that add benefit to the existing service model. In the Olallo House blueprint we can create meaningful activities for the people we support. Having the blueprint allows us to model where these fit in the support pathway and ensure that we have enough operational support to develop them meaningfully. If the existing structure doesn't support this, we can change it and add it into the model.

Service blueprinting making a difference

Service blueprinting can benefit all charities. SJOG is an organisation with a wide range of services that need to be coordinated in order to fulfil very specific needs. It can help visualise how services are working to be able to align front stage and backstage processes and it helps to understand cross-functional relationships that are key for running charities. Importantly, by creating a visual representation of the service it allows opportunities for innovation that sit around the services to emerge.

As it is a visual and collaborative tool it can make a difference in getting everyone on to the same level of understanding on how a service is run. Team members can participate in the making of the blueprint giving their point of view on a specific service, whether they are front line staff or back office staff. Through these conversations, insights that are useful and relevant across the organisation emerge.

Although the blueprinting process take investment in time and effort, the benefit are long lasting. Once completed any changes to the service can be modelled quickly allowing a consistent process to improvement and innovation.

References
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