

SWE Editorial

Grand Challenges : A way forward for Social Work

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Introduction

2016 has been a watershed year in many ways with a lurch to the right reflected in UK's Brexit vote and the implications of that, not just for the UK but also for the rest of Europe. The election of Donald Trump as President in the US and the implications that has for the world. North Korea's increased nuclear capability, the numbers of migrants making the perilous journeys from Libya and Syria and the precarious nature of many of those surviving in sub-Saharan Africa. All of these events, and many others, challenge us as social workers and social work educators to reflect on – where does social work stand in all of this? This editorial reflects on the development of grand challenges, already in existence in the US, and argues for such an approach in the UK and asks whether nationally identified grand challenges is one way to assert social work's value led and social justice approach across the globe.

Background

Predicting future possibilities for social work and social work education appears currently to be fraught with potential dangers and as Ferguson (2016) and Lorenz (2016) note, futures are shaped by histories and in particular the historical impact of long term neo-liberalism as a 'project' for transformation. This is further compounded by the 'financial crisis' in 2008 and subsequent austerity measures which has allowed the government to significantly cut local government finances and led to do levels of services that would not have been tolerated pre-2008. As the UK government continues to '*dismantle for improvement*' we are in danger of the wheel turning in pursuit of what Tunstill (2016) defines as a policy led transformation process seeking to define a profession, purely to meet political agendas where the motivation and the need to do something overtakes rationale, evidence, research, and the long standing commitment of practitioners, service users, managers and academics. The last six years alone tells a story of a profession euphemistically *under pressure* yet in reality it is a story of a profession which has experienced significant government intervention in the defining and shaping of social work as a profession and ironically, introduction of new measures which at times challenge the development of social work as a profession. Politically in the UK we have experienced government shaping of our profession through direct intervention in determining pre and post-qualifying curricula, closure of the professional college in England, withdrawal from an established regulator (Health Care Professions Council) to the development of a government led arms-length social work specific regulator. This structural challenge has been underpinned by new players and providers entering the field of service delivery providing a plurality of provision.

It is here that we also witness the demolishing of the silent concordat which underpins our profession, that is; society's role (and responsibility) to protect and empower vulnerable children and adults within a system of publically accountable care. Organisationally our profession is adapting and changing and introducing new ways of working to encourage plurality of the market and has almost, as Lorenz (2016 P.XXXXX) notes; reached hegemonic heights, representing the accepted face of British neoliberalism, now part of our everyday lives and conversations with limited attention paid to the resultant change to professional practice. The recent introduction of the new Children and Social Work Bill (2016) in England with a focus on 'innovation' through privatisation, fails to recognise the inherent contradiction of the goals of neoliberalist desire for efficiency pitched against the space and creativity of professionals to enable innovation and transformation. Progress to date, appears to suggest we are transforming to meet the needs of the neoliberal project and not the needs of the profession or, more importantly, the protection and support of our most vulnerable people. A sad state for social work within the UK but also an opportunity to shape and define our profession to be the profession we wish it to be.

It is perhaps in the work of Nye Bevan, architect of the NHS that change for the UK may be found. In his collection of essays, Bevan (In Place of Fear 1952: XX) wrote '*discontent arises from a knowledge of the possible, as contrasted with the actual*' and within a UK context, never before have we as a profession needed to explore the '*knowledge of the possible*' because the '*certainty of the actual*' is uncertain and destabilising. In considering the '*knowledge of the possible*' we all have a responsibility not only to highlight the failings of our history but also the moral courage to identify and propose the critical questions and solutions for social work of our time. That is, to collectively and collaboratively identify and seek active solutions to The Grand Challenges of our time by collectively developing a better future for individuals, communities and the society in which we all live.

The Grand Challenge Initiative

The Grand Challenge Initiative is an established and systematic process; a ground breaking initiative to champion social progress powered by science, research and practice which fosters and promotes innovation and seeks to identify and solve the Grand Challenges of our society and the role of social work within this. The Grand Challenges Initiative is rooted in four fundamental beliefs about social and societal development:

- Science, technology, practice and research, when applied appropriately, can have transformational effects
- Engaging the world in the quest for solutions is critical to instigating breakthrough progress.
- Each initiative is an experiment in the use of challenges to focus innovation in making an impact.
- A grand challenge is a specific critical barrier that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation.

Thus in essence, what would happen if we collectively brought together the visionaries, practitioners, scholars, service users and carers to identify and address the grand challenges facing us today? How could this process of identifying Grand Challenges and solutions drive forward social work as a profession?

Grand Challenges have been used for more than a century to address significant societal issues and change. Introduced by Dr David Hilbert (Singer & Brook 2011) who set out a list of 23 unsolved mathematical problems (Challenges) for the entire century and beyond. By clearly articulating specific challenges, Hilbert inspired a generation of mathematicians to work to overcome them. His initiative was a great success: nearly all of the Challenges he identified have since been solved. What makes a Grand Challenge is an area of activity where the precise path is unclear and the deep importance of the issue makes them Grand.

Many examples of the Grand Challenge approach exist across many different professions. The National Academy of Engineering successfully initiated a Grand Challenge Initiative which transformed the field by a) helping bridge the divide between engineering practice and research by focusing researchers attention on problems of major enduring societal significance b) promoting awareness and appreciation among the general public, c) reinvigorating and redirecting engineering education and research towards practical problems that require innovative solutions; and d) inspiring a new generation of engineering students and scholars who now define their work in terms of these challenges (O'Donnell 2012). In 2003, the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation sought to utilise the Grand Challenge Initiative to identify 16 challenges to global public health and have identified strategies to address each Grand Challenge (<http://grandchallenges.org/>). By identifying 16 challenges within four major scientific themes, Grand Challenges in Global Health, aims to bring focus and energy to defining and addressing global health issues which if solved, could lead to key advances in preventing, treating, and curing diseases of the developing world. . More recently in 2013, The American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare (AASWSW) (<http://aaswsw.org/grand-challenges-initiative/>) established a Grand Challenge Initiative led by American social work academics in partnership with a range of key stakeholders in social work. 12 challenges grouped within three core themes were identified and agreed across a range of social work stakeholders (see figure 1.1)

Figure 1.1 – American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare 12 Grand Challenges

Individual and family well-being	Stronger social fabric	Just society
Ensure healthy development for all youth Close the health gap	Eradicate social isolation End homelessness	Promote smart decarceration Build financial capability for all

Stop family violence	Create social responses to a changing environment	Reduce extreme economic inequality
Advance long and productive lives	Harness technology for social good	Achieve equal opportunity and justice

According to the AASWSW (2013) these Grand Challenges for Social Work represent a dynamic social agenda, an opportunity to call to action for researchers, practitioners, service users and carers to:

- Harness social work's practice and knowledge base;
- Collaborate with individuals, community-based organizations, and professionals from all fields and disciplines; and
- Work together to tackle some of our toughest social problems.

Developing a Grand Challenge Approach for social work within the UK is a compelling approach for compelling times. One which has the potential to be transformative by:

- Providing a compelling focus that attracts new generations of students and scholars, drawing together talented people around important shared and solution focused goals
- Bringing leading innovators and thinkers together to consider the Challenges of modern day
- Providing a platform for innovative, collaborative inter disciplinary work
- Capturing public's attention, interest and imagination to work together to address and solve pressing challenges
- Attracting new resources and establishes a new framework for funders, researchers, publishers, students, practitioners, academics, service users
- Creating a platform for progressive diplomacy and cooperation between key stakeholders in discipline areas

For more than a century social workers have been contributing and transforming society as it develops and supports the consequences of its developments. Today, our society faces increasing poverty, violence, incarceration, addiction, social inequality, isolation and increasing injustice which impacts upon us all. Professions, foundations, governments have launched the Grand Challenge Initiative to inspire, align and focus a field of energy towards meeting society's greatest needs. Now is the time for social work with the UK. A time for action, together, to help support those most in need.

In partnership with the Joint University Social Work Education Committee, this journal is seeking to establish a Grand Challenge Approach to social work within the UK by establishing a blue ribbon committee whereby academics, practitioners, activists, and

service users and carers and can come together to begin to develop a five year strategic level action plan which identifies a process for generating a collective understanding of achievements to date, identification of the Grand Challenges and their solutions; an impact framework which includes a process of dissemination and provides a rationale and direction for funding bodies and finally an impact framework with a transformation plan for change. Through the blue ribbon committee, a call for papers will be initiated to firstly identify key achievements to date and a second series of papers which outline proposals for the Grand Challenges of our time. Challenges must be:

- Big, bold, important and compelling
- Scientific evidence indicates that the challenge could be solved
- Meaningful and measureable progress to address the challenge can be made in a decade
- The challenge is likely to generate inter disciplinary collaboration
- Solution to the challenge requires significant innovation

Defining each Challenge will be challenging and in the selection of papers and identified Challenges, we will need to consider:

- What is known and what is uncertain?
- What is the exact nature of the identified Challenge?
- Does the proposal describe a difficult and discrete roadblock to progress?
- What is the likelihood that creative solutions are required and that grant proposals worthy of funding will be received to address it?
- Is there already substantial research activity aimed at solving the problem, which would make the intent of a Grand Challenge redundant?
- What are possible impacts on various aspects of society if the Challenge is successfully met?

A Grand Challenge initiative for social work within the UK has the potential to be transformative, collective and visionary in its intentions and impact. An opportunity to grasp the agenda and shape our profession to be the profession it so rightly deserves to be. Importantly, readers might wish to consider whether such an approach work in Norway, Greece, New Zealand, Chile, South Africa, Nepal, Singapore and China? Also, if such an approach was to be undertaken in each of these countries what would be the common Grand Challenges identified between nations and what would be nation specific. Would such an approach fracture how we currently define the nature of the social work task, or would it help to provide an international perspective that could raise the profile and nature of what we term social work?

References

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FOOTNOTE – Blue Ribbon Committee

In the United States, a **blue-ribbon panel** (or **blue ribbon commission**) is a group of exceptional people appointed to investigate or study or analyse a given question. Blue-ribbon panels generally have a degree of independence from political influence or other authority, and such panels usually have no direct authority of their own. Their value comes from their ability to use their expertise to issue findings or recommendations which can then be used by those with decision-making power to act.