

LE GRAND VISION



Architect of the social practice pilots in England, **Sir Julian Le Grand** has been one of the most influential government advisers in social policy. He tells *PSW* Editor Shahid Naqvi what he believes the future holds for social workers and social services

Some of the things that Julian Le Grand says would go down very well in a room full of social workers. Others like a lead balloon.

He believes social care should be the Government's spending priority ahead of the NHS. He thinks social workers should have professional autonomy. He criticises managerialism.

And yet he advocates competition rather than collaboration as the driving force for reform. He supports new fast-track graduate routes into practice such as Frontline that have upset so much of the social work education establishment.

It's worth listening to what Julian has to say. For in the field of public policy he has been one of the most influential advisers to government.

Titmuss Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics, he played a key role in shaping Tony

Blair's focus on choice and competition in health and education.

He is the brains behind the Child Trust Fund saving scheme; the previous Coalition government's pupil premium for less well off schoolchildren and the social work practice pilots set up to test new ways to deliver social services with a focus on outsourcing.

He also led a taskforce on what to do with Birmingham's troubled children's services: his recommendation for a "splitting of commissioning and provision" was recently proposed the way forward by the authority.

Knighted for services to social science and public policy last year, Julian believes Birmingham's woes are indicative of a bigger problem.

"There just seems to be some children's services that are not able to reform on their own.

"Both Birmingham and Doncaster [where trust status was thrust upon children's services in 2013] had been in trouble for a very long time. There had been a number of changes of management and new programmes introduced year after year but nothing seemed to work. Unfortunately you get a spiral of decline.

"Children's services in local authorities is not often seen by officials as a good career move. Politicians tend to avert their eyes because there is no vote in it unless there is some terrible scandal, unlike adults where there are votes.

"It is often a neglected area and then this spiral sets in."

Like the academisation of failing schools, Julian believes a "clean break" with the past is sometimes needed. Ultimately, however, he would like to go much further than just the "lifting and shifting" approach to replacing failing services with trusts. And he believes the social work practice pilots which he pioneered show the way.

Seven of them were set up across England around 2010 to test run contracted out adult services from small centres located within communities, similar to GP practices. Though most have ended due, says Julian,

to the economic crisis drying up funds, he maintains they are the model for the future.

“Service organisations do much better when they are small. The problem with large children’s social services departments like Birmingham is the managers get too far from the front line.”

Both the social work pilots and turning children services over to trusts have generated concern that they are steps toward privatisation and a future where profit is put ahead of people.

Julian has some sympathy with this but only sees it as a danger if social services are put in the hands of big business with distant shareholders to please.

“That is why it comes back to the small is beautiful argument. I don’t mind if they are like GP profit-making practices. People who work in GP practices and social work practices have a double motivation. One is to make a living but because they are working in the front line directly with the people they are trying to serve, they also have a motivation for providing as good a service as possible to them.”

So does this mean social workers of the future will have to be as skilled in running a small business as working with people? Not necessarily, says Julian.

“A good social work practice employs a business manager, like GP practices, which do seem to be capable of running a business and providing good services in the process.”

Julian is also convinced such a model is key to giving social workers back the professional autonomy they crave.

“Eileen Munro’s [author of the 2011 review into child protection] mantra is that the trouble with social work is managerialism has taken over from professionalism, which is a product of these large impersonal managerial organisations that run social services.

“When we were writing the report for social work practices we talked to a social worker who said ‘You train us to be professionals and you treat us like clerks’.

“That has been much of the problem with the workforce and why you see such low morale.”

Unsurprisingly, Julian supports Westminster reforms that promote experimentation in children’s services, such as the £200million innovation fund and plans in the Children and Social Work Bill enabling local authorities to work outside normal statutory rules.

He wants to see more local authorities adopt innovations but says there is a problem rolling out such innovations even if they have

been proven to work. His solution for this might not sit comfortably with many social workers.

“What is the incentive for other organisations to take it on board? It is more comfortable to stay where you are.

“That is why I am a believer in competition. I would see these small social work practices competing for contracts with the local authority.

“There is no doubt competition is an enormous spur to innovation. It is a better spur than collaboration. Collaboration doesn’t spread innovation. I want to see a more competitive environment to allow for these kind of spreads.”

This focus on competition is also why he supports the new fast-track graduate training routes into social work. He was involved in early discussions about Frontline, the two-year training for children and families social workers, and sits on the board of Think Ahead, the equivalent in mental health.

One of the criticisms of such new entry routes is that ‘high-flying’ graduates will not stay in the profession but use it as a stepping-stone into more lucrative careers. Teachfirst, the graduate fast-track programme for teaching upon which they are based, has a retention rate of around 50 per cent after five years.

Julian, however, does not see this as a

concern. “The Teachfirst candidates will be aware of the problems and difficulties and joys of teaching whatever they do. They change the attitude towards teaching. I think the same can be said about social work. We need a greater appreciation in the wider world of the value of social work, the joys and the difficulties.”

Julian maintains there is a “genuine commitment” to improve social services within government. He describes the current reforms as a “flailing around to find the best way to do it”.

“It is creative turmoil. And the thing about turmoil is it is very difficult to predict what the outcome will be.

“I know what I would like. Whatever the outcome is I am certain it will be better.”

Crucially, he believes the future must see a shift in spending away from health and into social services.

“I am not advocating spending more on the NHS but more in social care. We should shift the concern about lack of resources away from acute hospitals and towards children’s services and adults departments because that is where we can make some real gains really quickly if we can only get the resource going into them.”

That, without doubt, is a message the social work profession would be delighted for him to express in the corridors of power.

Biography

■ Sir Julian Le Grand has been the Richard Titmuss Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics since 1993. From 2003 to 2005 he was seconded to 10 Downing Street as Senior Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister

■ He is a Founding Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences, an Honorary Fellow of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine, and a Trustee of the Kings Fund. In 2007 he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts

■ He is currently Chairman of Health England: the National Reference Group for Health and Wellbeing for the UK Department of Health. He is also a member of the Group of Societal Policy Analysts advising the President of the European Commission. In 2007 he was Chairman of the Social Work Practices Working Group for the Department for Children, Families and Schools

■ He has acted as an adviser to the European Commission, the World Bank, the World Health Organisation, the OECD, HM Treasury, the UK Department of Work and Pensions and the BBC

■ He is the author, co-author or editor of eighteen books, and has written more than 100 journal articles and book chapters on economics, philosophy and public policy

■ He was one of *Prospect* magazine’s 100 top British public intellectuals and one of the Economic and Social Research Council’s ten Heroes of Dissemination

■ In 2015 he was knighted for services to social science and public service

■ His policy innovations include:

- The Child Trust Fund
- The Partnership Scheme for funding long term care
- The Pupil Premium
- The Social Work Practice
- Patient Budgets