

# A Grand Challenge Initiative for social work: a call for action to the social sciences

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*The Grand Challenge Initiative is an established, systematic process to champion social progress powered by science, research, and practice. It fosters and promotes innovation to identify and solve the grand challenges of our society. At a time of rapid political, economic, and societal change, as our society faces increasing poverty, inequality, isolation, and injustice, **Samantha Baron** sets out a Grand Challenges Initiative for social work in the UK. This offers social scientists an opportunity to proactively transform and contribute to a society we wish to be part of, and all are encouraged to get involved.*



Nye Bevan, architect of the NHS, wrote in his collection of essays, *In Place of Fear (1952)*: “discontent arises from a knowledge of the possible, as contrasted with the actual.” In a UK context, never before have we, as an academic community, needed to explore the “knowledge of the possible” because the “certainty of the actual” is so uncertain and destabilising. The impact of austerity measures and neoliberalist approaches on the social sciences and the communities we seek to serve is becoming a little alarming. Within social work, continued government intervention in shaping the profession is leading to the instability and fragility of a complex system designed to protect the most vulnerable within our society and communities. Focus is on the profession and academic community, rather than on supporting and resolving the fundamental social questions of our time.

Thus in considering the “knowledge of the possible” we as academics must begin to proactively shape the agenda by taking responsibility and having 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 developing a better future for individuals, communities, and the society in which we all live.



Image credit: [Moye\\_UoE\\_Grand\\_Challenges\\_1\\_064](#) by the University of Exeter. This work is

The Grand Challenge Initiative is an established, systematic process to champion social progress powered by science, research, and practice. It fosters and promotes innovation to identify and solve the grand challenges of our society. An established methodological approach recognised by national and international funders and charitable foundations, the Grand Challenge Initiative is rooted in four fundamental beliefs about social and societal development:

1. Science, technology, practice, and research, when applied appropriately, can have transformational effects
2. Engaging the world in the quest for solutions is critical to instigating breakthrough progress
3. Each initiative is an experiment in the use of challenges to focus innovation on making an impact
4. 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.

At times of rapid political, economic, and societal change, social sciences has a pivotal and valuable role to play in offering stability, vision, and direction as successive governments *dismantle for improvement* through a policy-led transformation process. For social work, this policy-led transformation focuses on systems and processes responding to the prevailing societal needs (or pressures?) of its time. Yet, what is absent from this process is a *collective* response to the identification of key social needs and an ambitious programme of funding and development to support and drive forwards societal change.

In essence, what would happen if we collectively brought together the visionaries, practitioners, scholars, service users, and carers within our social science community 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 part of the social science community to respond and proactively shape society in a different way?

Grand Challenge methodology has been used for more than a century to address significant societal issues and change. It was introduced by [Dr David Hilbert](#), 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.



**Image credit: [The Grand Challenge Equations: San Diego Supercomputer Center](#) by Duncan Hull. This work is licensed under a [CC BY 2.0 license](#).**

Thus, what makes a grand challenge is an area of activity where the precise path is unclear and the deep importance of the issue makes it “grand”.

Many other 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 to 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.

In 2003, the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation sought to utilise the Grand Challenge Initiative to identify [16 challenges to global public health](#). By identifying these 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 major advances in preventing, treating, and curing diseases of the developing world. More recently, [Cancer Research UK has released £100 million in funding for research into the next generation interventions for cancer](#).

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

- Providing a focus that attracts new generations of students and scholars, drawing together talented people around important shared and solution-focused goals
- Bringing together leading innovators and thinkers to consider modern-day challenges
- Providing a platform for innovative, collaborative interdisciplinary work
- Capturing the public’s attention, interest and imagination to work together to address and solve pressing challenges
- Attracting new resources and establishing a new framework for funders, researchers, publishers, students, practitioners, academics, and service users
- Creating a platform for progressive diplomacy and cooperation between key stakeholders in discipline areas
- Harnessing social work’s practice and knowledge base
- Collaborating with individuals, community-based organisations, and professionals from all fields and disciplines
- Working together to tackle some of our toughest social problems.

For more than a century social workers and social scientists have been contributing to and mediating the impacts of change and transforming society. Today, our society faces increasing poverty, violence, incarceration, addiction, social inequality, isolation, and increasing injustice which impacts upon us all. It is our time and responsibility as social scientists to proactively transform and contribute to a society we wish to be part of. Professions, foundations, governments have all launched Grand Challenge Initiatives to inspire, align and focus resources towards meeting society’s greatest needs. Now is the time for social work and the social science community to lead with ambition and innovation; a time for collaborative action, to help support those most in need.

The initiative is set to be launched at the Joint University Council Social Work Education and Research Conference later this year, at which presentations will be made on achievements to date and society’s grand challenges for the

future will also be identified. A blue ribbon committee will also be established, drawing upon key thinkers, leaders, academics, practitioners, and service users. For more information, please feel free to get in touch (contact details below).

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the author**

**Samantha Baron** is Chair of the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, a learned society established in 1901. She is also Head of Social Work at Manchester Metropolitan University. With over 20 years' experience within social work education, Samantha is leading on the Grand Challenge Initiative as part of a process to lead, challenge, and promote a proactive agenda for social work and social work education. As Chair, she represents social work education across government departments facilitating the academic-policy-practice interface and in establishing a Grand Challenge Initiative, leading for change and proactively positioning social work education to meet the future challenges of our time. Samantha can be contacted at: [S.Baron@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:S.Baron@mmu.ac.uk)

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