

UK: Splitting of Doncaster children services a model for further privatisations

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The decision to transfer children's social care services in Doncaster, south Yorkshire, England from local authority control to an independent trust is a defining moment in the government's push to privatise social services.

This is the first time an entire children's social services department has been removed from local authority control. Existing social workers will be transferred to what is known as a Community Interest Company, which will initially retain local government terms and conditions. Education will remain under local government control.

The transfer was the main conclusion of a supposedly independent review panel, which was headed by Julian Le Grand, one of the government's leading figures in the privatisation of schools. Le Grand is professor of social policy at the London School of Economics. It also included Alan Wood, director of children's services in Hackney, whom Education Secretary Michael Gove is recommending oversees the process.

Gove has backed the review panel's proposal to set up an independent trust by April 2014. There will be a transfer of powers from the council to the trust for up to ten years, with a view to only returning them to the council when it can prove its ability to carry out such functions. In reality, this will never happen.

The review was set up earlier this year in response to a series of high profile child protection failures in Doncaster, including the near death of two young boys tortured by two brothers from Edlington who were known to social workers. A total of 279 members of staff had been involved with the brothers' family over a 15-year period. Other child deaths in Doncaster have been the subject of serious case reviews.

These reviews did not produce the recommendations that Gove was looking for. Following the serious case

review into the Edlington brothers, which Gove deemed did not "meet his expectations", he ordered Lord Carlile QC to further look into Doncaster and other aspects of child protection. Carlile's report, which was published in November 2012, coincided with another inspection of Doncaster's children's services.

Gove did not respond until March this year, when he announced the latest review stating that not enough improvement was being made.

Doncaster has had six different directors of children's services in the past eight years. It has a high turnover of social workers, with a heavy reliance on agency staff.

The preferred option of the review panel was to outsource Doncaster's safeguarding to the private sector, but the report noted there were no companies with the relevant experience. The independent trust being imposed provides a template for other local authorities that are equally blighted by developing social problems as a result of decades of neglect and cuts in local spending. They will be forced to adopt this "new" model prior to full privatisation and/or service elimination.

Impower is a consultancy firm specialising in brokering the remains of public sector provision into social enterprise, and is involved in over fifty local authorities. Only three weeks earlier, it was given the task of working in partnership with Doncaster Council. Clearly, even this model, which had the support of the council, does not go far enough for the government and its lackeys in academia.

To back up its claims that the proposed structure is the way forward, the review cites enterprises set up in Hackney, London, Hull, Staffordshire and Kingston/Richmond in London. These cover aspects of education, youth work, health and the merger of

children's services across two local authorities.

All those who welcomed Gove's support have a vested interest in the outcome it proposes. There are innumerable companies set up to exploit and cherry pick from the public sector, such as Stepping Out, a consultancy which specialises in "spinning out" NHS and local government services into social enterprises. Craig Dearden-Phillips, Stepping Out's founder, enthused, "As a response to endemic failure, we welcome the creation of a new entity with a clear focus and ownership. It is a very attractive alternative to externalisation or any new council-owned organisation."

Richard Vize, commenting in the *Guardian*, said, "The Doncaster move comes at a time when Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education] is exerting increasing pressure on children's services through a tougher inspection regime. Councils are increasingly judged as inadequate under the more demanding unannounced inspections for child protection introduced in May 2012. Starting this November, under a new single inspection framework covering child protection, looked-after children and care leavers, councils will be rated inadequate for overall effectiveness if they are judged to be inadequate in any of three key inspection areas related to children at risk, children in care, and leadership, management and governance."

Less than a week after the report was released, Birmingham City Council children's services are being lined up for a Doncaster-style intervention. According to an article in the *Local Government Chronicle*, due to the sudden departure of Director of Children's Services Peter Duxbury, the Doncaster model is one that is being considered. Birmingham is the largest local authority in Britain.



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