As socialists we have an almost irreconcilable set of principles. On the one hand, as the name implies, we believe in empowering society and the individuals within it. A society in which individuals are little more than automatons, even though all of us are working for the common good is still not a healthy society. Yet we are also Utilitarian’s, and believe the common good is an overarching principle, which governs the actions of a flourishing society. This tension is very well illustrated in our approach to social care, especially regarding personal budgets.

Personal budgets are an individualised set of payments, even though this money is funded from the public purse. Personal Budgets allow the recipient freedom in execution of a plan to reach an agreed end. They enable a delivery package designed to achieve individualised wrap around care, empowering the person at its centre, and as a result it should be optimum in also achieving the best result for society.

Pragmatically there are several issues: Individualised plan delivery is in practice also fragmented delivery, more expensive, less transparent, and with room for exploitation to take root. On a smaller scale, where the effects are more publicly observable, and easier to monitor, this is not insurmountable, except for the extra costs. On a larger scale the extra costings will be a drain on the system, meaning it will work extremely well for some, while others, equally or even more meritorious, are left unsupported, and disempowered, or even exploited. Just one such individual has an impact on the people surrounding them. A frail older person, adult or child who is unsupported can mean family or friends giving up work to care with the effects of this going forward to a point where the people concerned themselves have financial, mental health and physical health issues turning them into a vulnerable member of their society. An aspect of a revolving door landscape seldom considered. From the financial perspective and therefore the utilitarian perspective, personal budgets in their pure form are not successful.

Empowerment for some can be disempowerment for others. A strong and competent individual may relish taking on the tasks of being an employer, assuming adequately funded to do so. The moment the financial support is lessened, this task may become more a burden than a joy. There is also the need for expert advice in less routine situations. If there is no funding for this in the equation, the financial implications are possibly catastrophic. If the same empowerment is given or foisted, in a poorly staffed and funded system, onto a more fragile individual there is the possibility of exploitation in a fragmented system, either by the employees or by the person themselves. Poor pay, and conditions may tempt some to financial exploitation, while mental and physical abuse may also occur, and go unnoticed.

The SHA believes that no system will be equitable, fair, and good for both society and the individual unless this tension is fully addressed. This will not happen by appeasing the loudest, or most media appealing voices, depending on what crisis is gaining attention at that particular moment.

To put it bluntly, the needs of justice, fairness, the individual and society are not served if we are empowering George to gain employment on a personal budget, while in the next road, Mary has an almost non-existent service and her son Jim has to hand in his notice to his employer to care for his mother: unsupported, disempowered and unemployed in his turn.

We believe in the SHA that a localised system, with local voices of the people most concerned is essential, along with national standards and a powerful national inspection and response team where irregularities abuse and so on might necessitate investigation. Key though is education and proper regard for the dignity and wellbeing of both staff and users. The public needs to be more aware that a system such as a national care service or the NHS is a driver of local and national prosperity, and that there is no need to fear a well-paid, trained and numerous staffing level, and a well-funded system. Nor should they fear a more generous benefit system. There may be no such thing as trickle down, in our current world there are too few people at the fountain head of any such system. Trickle across is both affordable, and sustainable. If the economy was a farm this system would be the equivalent of a field of rich soil, and a bag of seeds.

We believe that some input from non-public organisations could be of use. There is a world of difference between a small number of local people getting together to enrich the lives of others, and add the missing cherry on top if the public cake for very little cost – if any, as they may be adding such hidden benefits as less loneliness, a sense of purpose and so on, to an organisation dedicated to highlighting and hoovering up profit making opportunities. It would be both expensive and disruptive to tackle this culture immediately and head on. This would take even more funding from an already precarious funding position. Quite small policy changes at the top could be implemented to encourage the public sector to take more control, and the small NFP or charity to provide on the small scale, services which would otherwise not be available, large scale organisations could be gently (and non-litigiously) discouraged – maybe by a more level playing field and mandatory good practice and staff education. The Scottish model may provide clues as to what works and what does not. An experienced commissioning staff could well be used to decommission? A longer, slower route could well allow the time for a more considered and individualised approach.

In conclusion this is a complex issue requiring complex and multi-faceted answers. The system will need to be generously funded, and staffed, but we see that as a utilitarian plus. Indeed, such a system could well provide a kick start to a flourishing economy. It would also see an end to young people sitting in a circle round an institutionalised wall, and for that matter, older people sitting in a circle round an institutionalised wall. Our frail and sick would be properly cared for with dignity and respect, with friends and relatives providing the icing on the cake if they wished and were able, but at no extra emotional and physical cost to themselves, other than that which they are already paying – itself a longer term societal benefit. Disabled people would be enabled to contribute and engage, frailer people would be supported to live full and better lives, according to their wishes and needs where these can be expressed. Carers would feel they were useful and appreciated, not wrung out to the point where they themselves join the ranks of the frail. If they wanted to and were able, they could maintain their independent lives, including their work lives and family lives.

The SHA has high, and achievable aspirations for social care across all of society and across all generations. We believe in fairness and equality, financial stability, dignity, respect, human rights and quality of services for all: deliverers, those in receipt of services and all benefitting, however indirectly from them.