

Working towards better outcomes in local service delivery

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Since at least 1968 in the UK, inequalities in local service delivery have contributed to growing spatial social polarisation. There is a very long tradition of work that demonstrates how poorer services are provided to people in poorer areas. This work continues today, repeatedly showing that the most qualified teachers and the highest number of doctors are more likely – on average – to be working where there is less need for their services, even when funding for their provision is entirely controlled by government.

What has not been shown clearly to date is how these inequalities exacerbate local inequalities by encouraging people to segregate more and more by wealth, both locally and nationally. We have yet to prove that these correlations are at all helpful to the people who appear superficially to most benefit - those who gain access to medical staff more easily because there are more staff where they live, or whose children are taught by 'better' teachers. And we have yet to show that we have the ability, collectively, to address these problems.

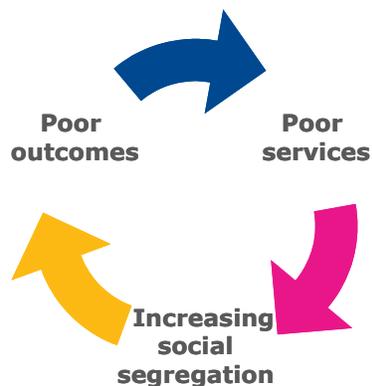
Public services play a role at the local level

What makes an area more desirable? Many things. People often say that, if they had a choice over where to live, they chose their home because they liked the look of the house, the décor, it was on a 'nice road', had the right number of bedrooms, 'felt right'. However, when house prices are modeled a series of local factors are usually found to matter greatly. Chief among these are the following five, most of which directly or indirectly relate to good and poor local services or environments:

- Perceived quality of local schools (raising house prices by private school fee amounts in areas with the 'best' state schools)
- Amenity of local services such as health (areas without stretched services do well)
- Housing type (detached etc) and 'the neighbours' (owner occupiers are preferred to, say, students)
- The availability of employment – which is key to the gradient in prices away from many cities
- A sense of safety, even community. Does the area appear to have little crime, safe roads, less graffiti, mess on the streets?

For many people the most important aspect of these services are provided by the state or very strongly influenced by it. And when services are not very good, they both help maintain inequalities and can increase them. Here are some ways:

- State schools: 93% of children go and they come in as many varieties of state schools now as there are of Heinz beans. People have become more polarised over time between areas as they fight for better schooling.
- National Health Service: 93% of people and more use this for illness that really matters; 100% for A&E. GPs matter most. There are still most GPs where they are least needed, where people have the best health.
- Social Housing has a much larger influence than you may think. Some 5 million will soon be on waiting lists to be housed nationally, most do not expect to be. Roughly a fifth of households are in this tenure, its absence serves as a magnet attracting people with money to live where social housing isn't, again increasing spatial social polarization.
- Direct state employment matters. Median wages are higher in the public than private sectors. Of all workers, 20% are directly employed by the state, but for each of those how many privately employed cleaners are there cleaning their offices? Local government can pay a living wage.
- In terms of safety the local state has direct input via the police, but the police do little to make one area safer than another. Of any single cause, the greatest killers of people aged 5 to 35 involve cars in some way. It is only local government that can lobby effectively to make local roads safe.



In short, the most important levers affecting the desirability of different residential areas are in the hands of government and especially local government. Government has always had huge control over whether our cities are socially divided or come together. Before government controlled pollution it was often the areas to the north east of towns which were the most effected by smog. These are still often the poorest areas and the south west still often the richest. In a city like Sheffield, where I live, it is much better state schools, better access to services such as doctors, not having to live near tenants, massive state employment, and a huge amount of traffic calming and management that makes the South West of the city attractive. Over the years, Sheffield and most other cities in Britain, has slowly become more socially polarised as a result.

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Local authorities have a role to play

The local state holds most of the cards when it comes to what is needed to reduce spatial social polarisation. It has tremendous power to make people's lives better, through measures as varied as the living wage, speed limits and school meals.

If Boris Johnson can agree that the GLA and any of its contractors pay the London living wage then no one else has an excuse. Five times as many children are killed by cars in the poor quarter of cities. Oxford, where I was brought up, is likely to be the first all 20mph city. Not only will that save lives in Oxford; but living near poor areas in that town increases slightly in amenity while living in a twee village out of town reduces in value just a little. Next introduce more cycle lanes and reduce parking in the city.

However, the latest I hear is that they will start with the more affluent parts of Oxford being made 20mph first. The roads are a "local service provision". Making the roads safer in the part of town which is safest to begin with does not reduce inequalities.

It is the state, local and national, that holds most of the cards when it comes to what is needed to reduce spatial social polarisation. Take for instance free school meals. Here is one example of what is being done with them:

"The vision for the Online Free School Meals (FSM) project is of an 'end-to-end', citizen-focused services that transforms the way in which eligible partners are supported in ensuring that their children receive a free school meal. The project, which has involved Hertfordshire CC, Tameside MBC and Warwickshire CC in developing proof-of-concept models, is a genuine opportunity for government to demonstrate, in a key area, that it can work collaboratively to make services simpler, and quicker to access and deliver."¹

I would suggest instead it is better to abolish free school meals, which were introduced after the Boer war. They were a solution for another age. We don't have free school chairs or tables for means-tested children, while others pay for their chairs and tables or bring them in from home.

Simply have school meals – which happen to be free to all who want them. Children can still bring their own food in, but no one is stigmatized by their parents' income. This is almost ready to be implemented in Scotland, under trial in several places in England, but sadly not Hull any more. This suggestion is far from controversial. However, the alternative, if all children having to pay for their school meals would require a citizen's wage. We are more likely to get that through European harmonization of tax and benefits than from an initiative from within Britain, but it is still a long way off.

¹ IDeA (2008). Front office shared services (FOSS) project. London, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) (page 37).

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Quality also improves in the state sector (mimicking private education and health) when child to teacher ratios are improved; similarly with nurses and doctors patient ratios. The buying of homes in affluent areas for social housing, usually at auction, or better still a right-to-sell (and become a tenant to avoid repossession) would quickly diminish the cachet of owner occupied ghettos.

There is little evidence that gaps like these are being narrowed within British cities other than the crude narrowing that occurred when unemployment fell. Then only a narrowing was possible as unemployment was near turnover minima in affluent city enclaves. Similarly, when GCSE 5 A-C pass rates are already very high in affluent areas, the rise in the average results in an apparent narrowing – but only because educational achievement that matters is now mainly measured at older ages. Local policies to fund the narrowing of the gap between areas are few, and in Sheffield's case were cut in May 2008 by local government. Policy may be going in the wrong direction.

From local to national: growing geographical inequalities

The social polarisation taking place on local levels is a strong trend that is not going away. And, critically, local inequalities are driving national-level inequalities. A group of colleagues from the University of Sheffield has recently explored this polarisation as part of the 'Changing Britain' project, funded by the BBC.² We mapped a series of social trends from as far back as 1945, according to BBC TV and radio areas.

The BBC's TV areas look like this (the map on the right is a cartogram with area drawn in proportion to population):

² This work was undertaken by members of the social and spatial inequalities group at the University of Sheffield including efforts from: Dan Vickers, Bethan Thomas, John Pritchard, and Dimitris Ballas.

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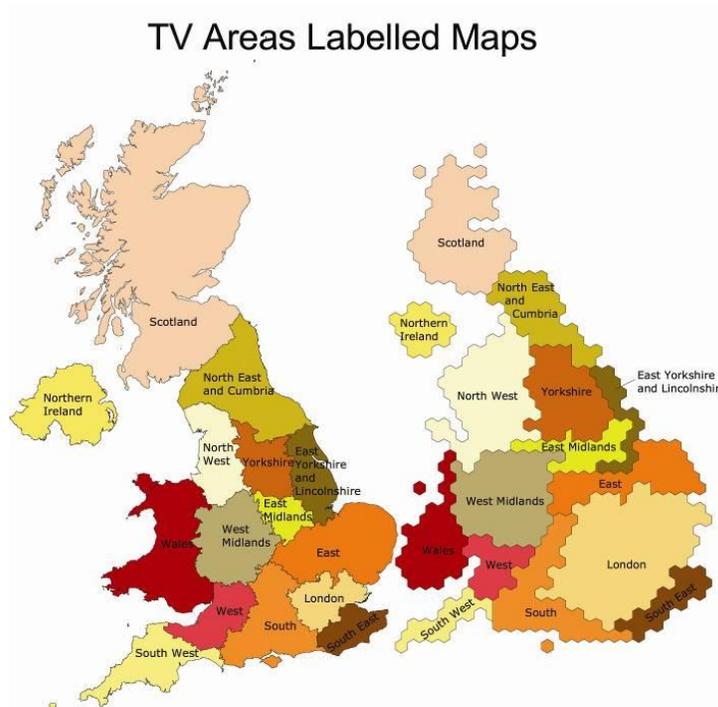


Figure 1

In the map on the right each hexagon is a parliamentary constituency.

The BBC radio areas look like this (the map on the right is a population cartogram):³

³ We have created some fictitious radio regions up for Scotland and Wales to be comparable to those in England.

By using this geography as a basis, you can see very simply how population has changed over time in Britain and where we are sharply diverging – be it by population size, age or wealth and poverty. For example, Figure 3 presents population movement between 1981 and 2006.

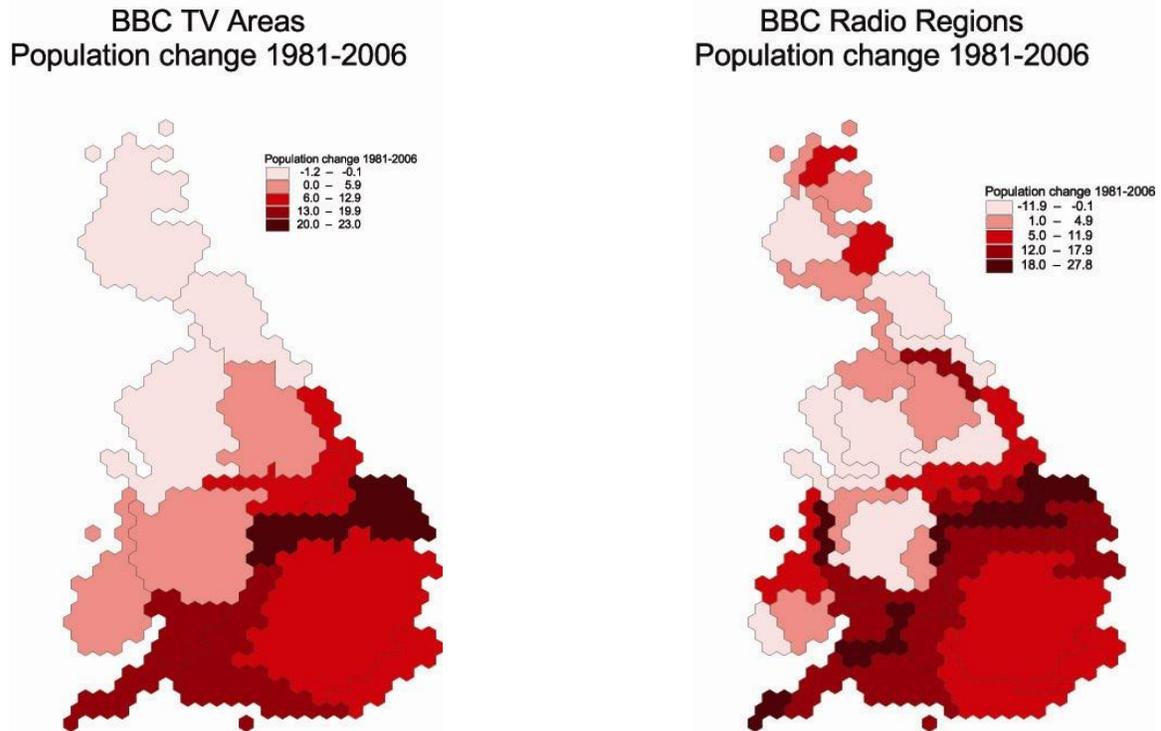


Figure 3

Notice that, when shown by radio area, it is mainly within the south that population growth has occurred. Such change has had the effect of sharpening up the north-south divide when the largest increases have been near that border.

Figure 4 shows the geographical picture of population spread by age, just for 2006. Note that, by 2006, London became the place to be up to age 44, and the place to leave most clearly after that age.

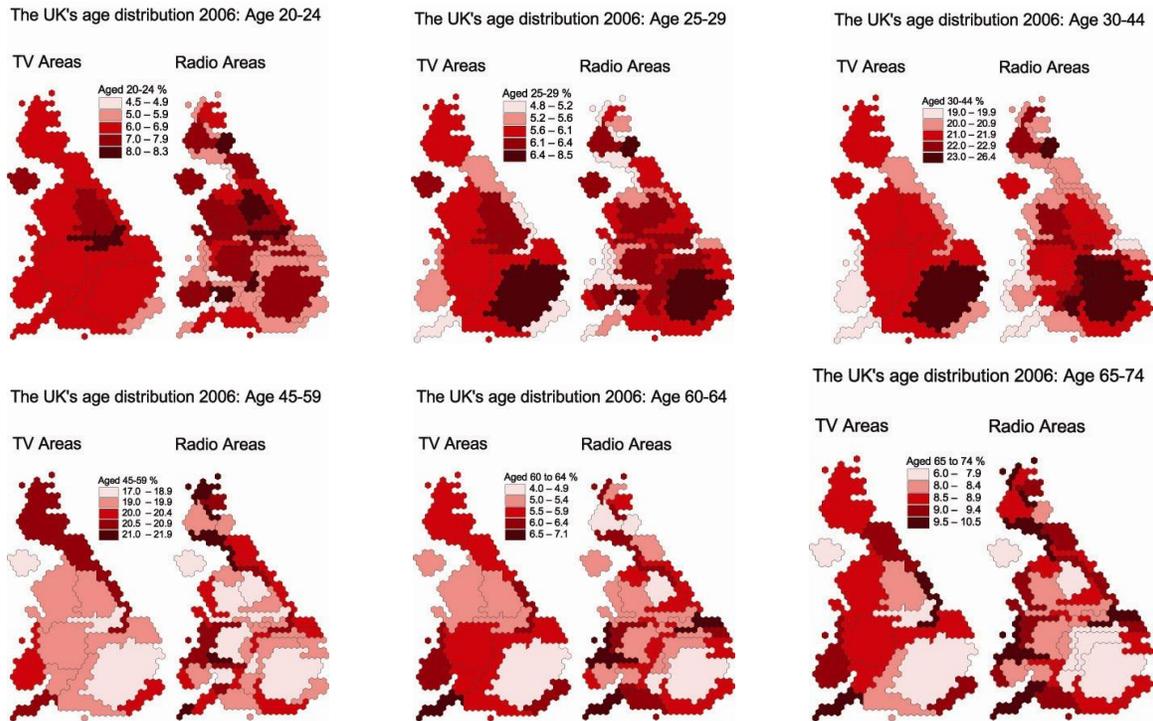


Figure 4

It is not just as simple as population movement, and the divergences between where old and young live. The gaps have also been growing according to wealth and poverty between different parts of the country - as well as within cities.

The maps below give the latest detailed picture we can create prior to the release of 2011 census data. Complex methods of combining censuses and surveys are used to draw these maps and to chart the slow and steady polarisation of people by poverty and wealth between areas.

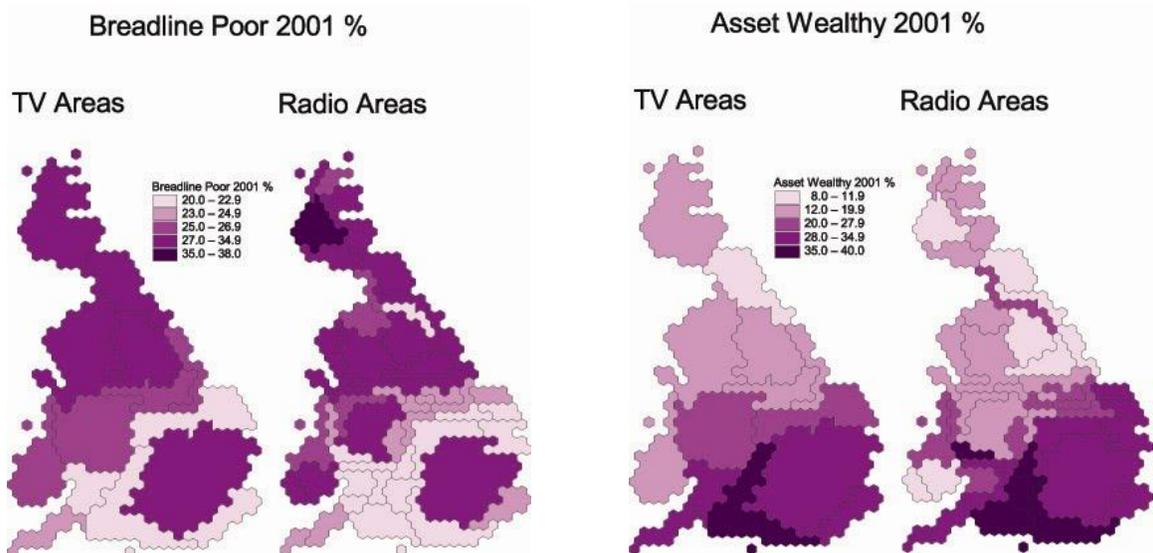


Figure 5

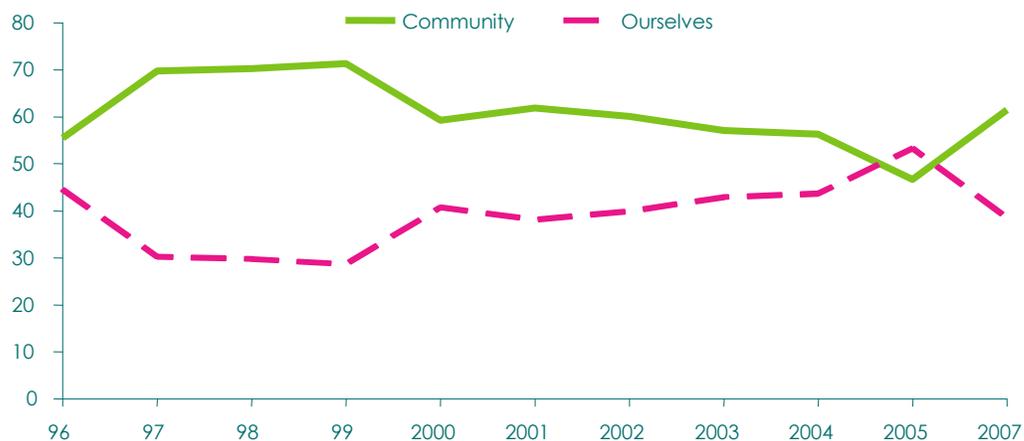
The important point to make when we look at these kinds of cleavages is not simply that the totals are increasing, but that the differences between areas are growing more extreme. And that people and places in Britain are not characterised just by standard understandings of poverty and wealth and all that correlates with them. They are other key cleavages, such as loneliness, which is also growing more extreme in some areas more than others. We have found that, between different, small areas, loneliness rates have diverged over time (Dorling and Gunnell, 2003). These kinds of measures of social fragmentation are an attempt to quantify social glue and social atomisation. In the case of the latter, measures are rising.

Would the public welcome action?

In the run up to the 1997 general election there was an upwelling of feelings of community, of "all being in it together", eerily echoed in sentiment in the United States after the election of 4 November 2008. From 1997 to at least 2005 that sentiment declined as Figure 6 shows, with selfishness winning again by 2005. But by early 2007 the position had reversed again. Long before former certainties began to crash around us (of financial and social stability), people at the very first signs of trouble began to say again that looking after the community should come first.

"The quality of life in Britain is best improved by..."

- (a) Looking after the community's interests rather than your own
- (b) Looking after ourselves which ultimately raises standards..."

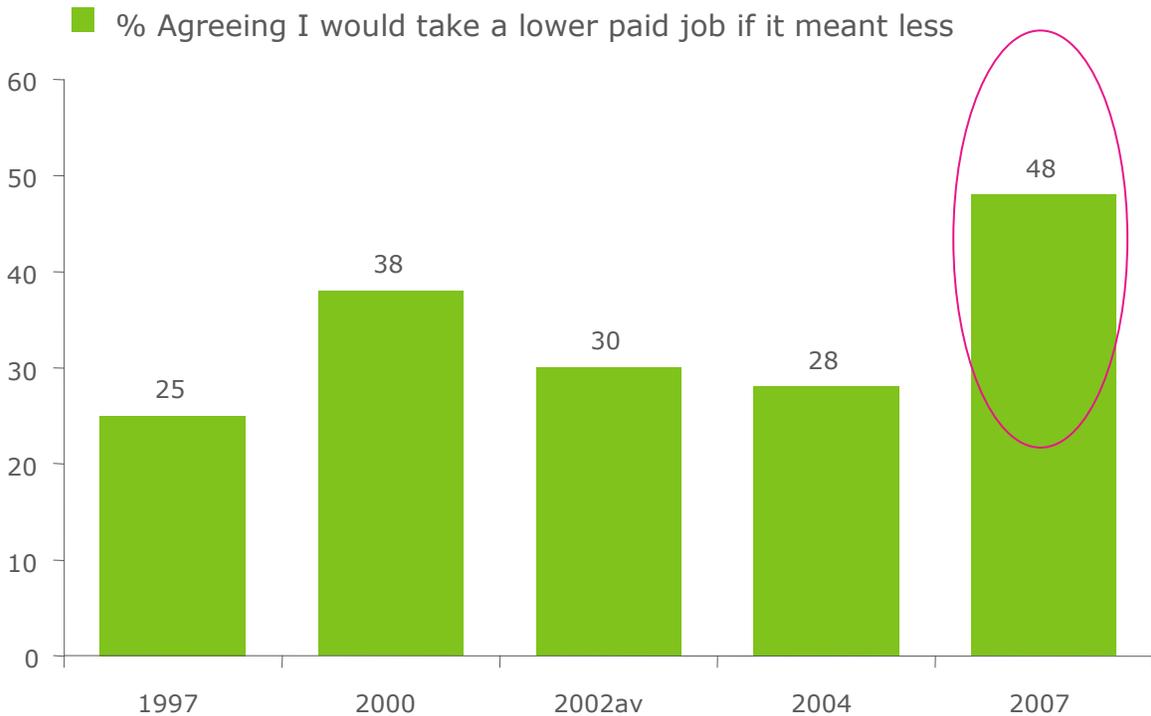


Source: The Futures Company *Planning for Consumer Change 2007*. Note that this chart excludes 'don't know' and 'not stated' which account for 16.5% and 0.5% of respondents, respectively by 2007.

Figure 6

People are beginning to change their priorities slightly in light of issues such as rising potential loneliness, stress, and because in many ways we have now become affluent enough to cover our basic needs and are realising that we should be looking for more from life than simply trying to earn more to be able to live away from the neighbours (and near new more affluent ones who might turn out to be even more objectionable, or who will in turn want to move away from us!). Consider how The

Futures Company *Planning for Consumer Change* found attitudes to work changing at the very start of the current down turn:

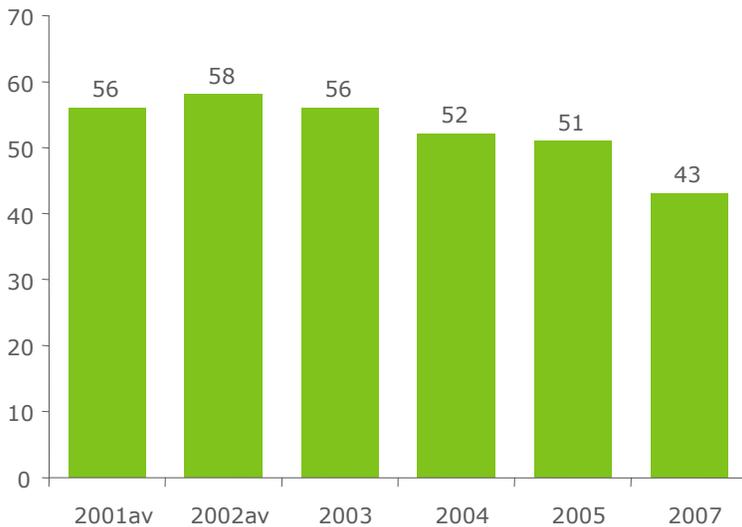


Source: The Futures Company *Planning for Consumer Change 2007*.

Figure 7

Today we see some core values (materialism, individualism) being drawn into question. Consider how attitudes to consumer choice are changing:

■ % Agreeing you can never have too much choice in life



36% agree that they are willing to spend money

Source: The Futures Company *Planning for Consumer Change 2007*.

Figure 8

This research reveals a public appetite for the state to play a bigger role in improving people's increasingly unequal lives, to reduce the uncertainties in life, to reduce inequalities.

Conclusion

The temperature in terms of spatial social polarisation in Britain has been slowly rising since at least 1968. If you were to describe the world of 2008 to people living in 1968 there are many things they would not choose to have: the length of commutes, our house prices, and price differentials, paranoia about areas and schools, the unfairness of NHS resource distribution and other state goods.

Differential migration, year by year, slowly adds to the social division of Britain. The people who can mostly move where it is more expensive to live, while those who cannot move out and down. The gaps are growing and divisions widening. The choices and freedoms of all are constrained as a result. The maintenance of old state systems such as free school meals and perceptions of social housing as low-quality maintain the engine of divisions. Local authorities and central government not paying decent wages to all their workers maintains divisions. A reluctance to understand what is needed to encourage medical and education staff to move where they are most needed maintains divisions.

Local service delivery is hard when the area being 'delivered to' is poor. What keeps areas poor is largely bad local service delivery. What maintains the housing hierarchy from the top of the hill to the bottom are finally graded differentiations in everything from wealth, to health, to death rates, the extra qualifications of teachers and doctors, the proportion of children on free school meals, the frequency of speed bumps and restrictions, and of course, still the likelihood of their being 'period features' to your property (but often that is code of what most matters).

Those living at the top of the hill will live far more stress free lives if they are worrying less about dropping down the slopes. Everyone benefits from living in a society made a fraction more equal, one in which the differences between areas are not always widening. Life is better when the temperature is turned down a little.

Implications

- **... FOR LOCAL SERVICES**

The state needs to be brave and to devise new ways of doing things to slow down growing spatial inequalities. A uniformity of good service would reduce inequality as well as improve what is already of high quality.

- **... FOR THE EVIDENCE BASE**

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This work requires bespoke methods for estimating poverty and wealth locally – otherwise we would not know that the country is slowly dividing between rich and poor areas. We need innovative research, and we need to pull together the enormous range of evidence already out there more imaginatively.

Queue Joel...

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