

What are today's social evils?

The results of a web consultation

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Executive summary

In 1904, Joseph Rowntree identified poverty, war, slavery, intemperance, the opium trade, impurity and gambling as major social evils facing British society. This report presents the findings of a public consultation which explores what social evils face Britain today.

The consultation

The consultation was conducted online on the website www.socialevils.org.uk. Anyone could take part and 3,500 people did so, sharing a wide range of views about the underlying social problems that cause the most damage to British society or the most misery to its people. This group is unlikely to be representative of the British population generally and it was recognised from the start that conducting the survey online would exclude some groups. In order to address this, the National Centre for Social Research was commissioned to explore today's social evils with groups that were less likely to be reached through the online consultation. The results of this strand of work are detailed in a separate report.¹

Findings

It is clear from the thoughtful responses received that the concept of 'social evil' has resonated with people and provided them with the opportunity to think carefully about the nature of British society. People not only offered their thoughts on what today's social evils are, but gave their opinions about what has caused these evils, where responsibility for them might lie and why they are so damaging to British society. The responses revealed a complicated

web of intertwined and overlapping issues and the views people expressed sometimes conflicted with each other. So the consultation does not leave us with a simple list of social evils that can be tackled easily or in isolation, but it did highlight some key areas of serious concern.

A particularly dominant theme concerned the distinct but connected issues of *individualism, consumerism and greed, and a decline of community*. Participants felt that values rooted in relationships and communities have been eclipsed by a concern only for ourselves, our immediate family and consumer goods.

The *misuse of drugs and alcohol* was another key theme: people felt that there has been an increase in the consumption of these substances. This social evil stood out as being rooted in a network of other evils, with drugs and alcohol seen to be both the consequence and cause of many other social problems, such as family breakdown and poverty.

Another dominant issue was the *decline of values*. Participants felt that people's actions are increasingly determined by their own selfish wants rather than the needs of others or of society more broadly. They highlighted in particular a lack of respect, tolerance, honesty, reciprocity, empathy and compassion.

Issues relating to families and young people were another central concern: *family breakdown*

¹ Modern-day social evils: The voices of unheard groups.

and poor parenting were identified as key drivers of other social evils and were seen to have a damaging impact on young people in particular. They were described as both the perpetrators and victims of other social evils: while some focused on their destructive behaviour (including drug and alcohol use and anti-social behaviour), others highlighted the injustices young people themselves suffer. Participants highlighted for example the lack of positive role models and the fact that young people are stereotyped. Others felt that they are failed by the family and schools.

Inequality and poverty were both identified as major social evils: they were commonly described as fundamental evils that underpin and exacerbate many others. Poverty was seen to have multiple damaging impacts for people and inequality was identified as both an absolute moral wrong and something that creates divisions in society. People felt that vast inequalities of income, for example, do not fairly reflect the effort that people put into earning a living and that as a society we tolerate poverty and inequality and lack compassion towards vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

The last major theme that emerged from the consultation was to do with *institutions, apathy and a democratic deficit*. Within this broad theme, participants identified a host of more specific social evils. The *government, media, education system* and *big business* were all subject to criticism. For example, people felt that the government has failed to remedy other social evils like inequality or drug use. People identified a democratic deficit in Britain and felt either that people are apathetic or that political institutions fail to provide opportunities to participate.

These were the six most dominant themes to emerge but a host of other concerns were also voiced, including violence and crime, gender inequality, religion and the decline of religion, social diversity, immigration and intolerance, and issues around health and the environment. People agreed that violence and crime, damage

to the environment and health inequalities were social evils, but there was more disagreement around the other themes. A common view was that gender inequality and, in particular, the unequal status of women in society, is a social evil, but others worried by contrast that feminism and the changing role of women in society has had damaging effects, undermining the family unit for example. Religion was another area of controversy with some people identifying religion itself and others the decline of religion as a social evil. Similarly, immigration was identified as an important social evil, but some participants criticised people's intolerance of immigrants and other newcomers.

Conclusion

Taken together, the responses reflect a sense of unease about the trends that people see shaping modern Britain and a feeling that as individuals we are not in control of these social changes, but hostage to them. While some participants recognised that these rapid social changes have brought various benefits, they were worried about the decline of many things they value – community, morality, the family – and the growth of things that they feel are damaging – individualism, consumerism and greed, inequality, apathy and the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

In spite of this, the consultation suggests that people want to live in a more equal society in which communities are stronger and in which there is a shared set of values. Finding ways – as individuals, families, communities, institutions and governments – to move towards a better society and away from these 'evils' is a key challenge the consultation leaves us with. But participants were unsure how to meet this challenge: their extensive knowledge of the complexity and scale of today's social evils seemed to leave people feeling unable to tackle these problems in their day-to-day lives and minute-by-minute actions. Overcoming this powerlessness is another important challenge.

So there are two questions that the consultation leaves us with: firstly, can we reach a broader consensus on what today's social evils are? And secondly, how can we – as individuals, families, communities, institutions and governments – move towards a better society and away from these evils? Reflecting these questions, the second phase of the social evils programme will take a more detailed look at some of these issues and seek a range of perspectives on what the possible solutions to today's social evils might be.

A century has passed since Joseph Rowntree set up the three trusts which bear his name and which he hoped would “search out the underlying causes of weakness or evil in the community”. In 1904, he identified war, slavery, intemperance, the opium trade, impurity and gambling as the “great scourges of humanity”. However, he recognised that times would change and he wanted his trusts to be “free to adapt themselves to the ever changing necessities of the nation”.

The social evils programme was initiated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to fulfil its founder’s wishes and identify the underlying social problems that cause the most damage to British society today, or the most misery to its people. In order to canvass the views of a wide range of people, the public was invited to offer its perspective on current social evils in an online consultation. This report describes the findings from an analysis of the 3,500 responses received.

The consultation revealed a deep sense of unease about the trends people see shaping modern Britain. Diverse and often conflicting views were expressed and it will not be possible to discuss all the ‘evils’ identified in a report of this length (a note on how the analysis was done can be found in the appendix). However, some dominant themes did stand out, in particular themes 1 to 6 listed below, with themes 7 to 12 less dominant but still important concerns among participants. These themes form the structure of this paper:

1. Individualism, consumerism and a decline of community
2. Drugs and alcohol
3. A decline of values
4. Families and young people
5. Inequality and poverty
6. Institutions, apathy and a democratic deficit
7. Violence and crime
8. Gender inequality
9. Religion
10. Social diversity, immigration and intolerance
11. Health and care
12. Environmental issues

The themes are closely intertwined and often overlapping. Instead of providing a list of social evils that can be tackled easily or in isolation, the consultation revealed a complex web of issues that people are deeply concerned about.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the social evils web consultation

The screenshot shows the top of a web form for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. At the top left is the logo and name 'JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION'. The main heading is 'What are the social evils facing the UK today?'. Below this is a sub-heading 'What are the current social evils, and why?'. A list of instructions follows: 'Tell us as briefly as possible what you think, and why.', 'Please provide your answers in order of importance, and fill in the first box at least.', and 'Closing date: 30 September 2007.'. A note states 'Your responses are completely confidential. You don't have to submit any personal details, but leave your name and email address if you want us to keep you informed about our progress.'. A link 'www.sociale evils.org.uk' is provided. The form contains three text input fields, each preceded by a label: 'I think the worst social evil facing UK society is:', 'Another social evil facing UK society is:', and 'Another social evil facing UK society is:'. At the bottom right of the form is a button labeled 'Next page >>'.

The online consultation was hosted on the website www.sociale evils.org.uk between July and September 2007. People were asked to write briefly about the top three social evils which in their view cause the most damage to British society as a whole or the most misery to its people (see Figure 1). The intention was not to undertake a statistically sound quantitative survey, but rather to trigger thoughtful responses from the people who took part. By hosting the consultation on the web, participation was open to a wide audience, although it was recognised from the outset that this method would exclude some groups.

The consultation was publicised in a number of ways, to ensure that a range of people had the opportunity to contribute. The national launch of

the consultation took place at a public lecture in London on 19 July 2007 at the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce. On 7 July 2007 the social evils programme was discussed on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme and was also the topic for discussion on Radio 4's *You and Yours*, a lunchtime discussion and phone-in show. The consultation was also covered in several national newspapers, including the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *The Scotsman*, and a letter was published in 79 of the UK's regional newspapers, including several in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

As well as this media coverage, online advertisements (Google Ads) were used to direct people to the social evils website. These targeted audiences were unlikely to have heard about the consultation elsewhere, including young people and black and minority ethnic groups. Some of the most effective advertisements were on *MySpace* and *Bebo*, two social networking sites popular among young people, although most people were directed to the consultation via the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's website.

Three and half thousand submissions were received via the website and a further 100 responses were sent to the JRF by post. Those who responded were overwhelmingly 'white British' and between the ages of 26 and 65: younger and older groups were under-represented. More extensive information on who took part was not collected, but participants are likely to reflect the methods of publicity used and it is probable middle-class groups are over-represented. The results should be read with this in mind.

The voices of unheard groups

From the start, it was recognised that relying on a website consultation would exclude people without access to the internet. It was also recognised that socially excluded groups might not hear about the consultation. In order to ensure that the views of often-unheard groups were represented, the National Centre for Social Research (an independent social research organisation) was commissioned to carry out a separate piece of research involving these potentially unheard voices. Their findings are published in a separate report which can be found at www.socialevils.org.uk.²

Using the word ‘evil’

The term ‘social evil’ appears to have struck a chord with people – both in the responses to the consultation and in wider discussions in the media and elsewhere – but it has also been controversial. Debates about what today’s social evils might be have often been preceded by discussions about how appropriate the phrase is. As described above, its origins lie with Joseph Rowntree, who was committed to seeking out the underlying causes of “evil in the community”.

The phrase has clearly made some people responding to the consultation uncomfortable. For example, some worried that it would prompt crude accounts of complex social phenomena, encouraging “division of issues into black and white categories” and implying “a duality between me who is ok and you who is not”. Others were concerned that framing this debate around the concept of social evils would encourage a focus on the negative that would overshadow what is good about living in contemporary Britain. For example, one person said that today’s social evils “are no greater problem than existed 100 years ago” and

another that “the fabric of society appears to be in fine fettle as far as I can see”.

In spite of these concerns, our overwhelming impression is that the concept of social evils has resonated in a positive way with people: it has tapped into issues that people deeply care about. For example, one person said “I am moved to respond: it is a subject which needs addressing with some urgency”. Another asked, “How does one start?” Far from prompting simplistic diagnoses of social issues, the phrase appears to have provoked thoughtful analyses of what people regard as the most fundamental issues facing society today.

² Modern-day social evils: The voices of unheard groups.

Findings: What are today's social evils?

Individualism, consumerism and a decline of community

One of the most dominant themes emerging from the consultation concerns the perceived growth of 'individualism' and the primacy of consumer goods, money and wealth over values rooted in communities.

Individualism: "a me, me, me society"

Participants often felt that people today "see themselves only as individuals and not as part of a wider society" and this individualism was seen to be a root cause of many other social problems. One person explained for example how it "drives everything from greed and wasteful consumption to eating disorders and a preoccupation with celebrity. It is the darkest force within the modern collective psyche." Participants often focused on this "cult of the individual", but also emphasised "insularity" at the family level:

Most of our friends have no priorities external to their families. For example, they agree that climate change is a serious problem but will not alter their lifestyles because it is an external pressure outside the family universe.

Nothing is more important than my success, comfort and convenience – and that of my family.

People felt that this outlook is damaging because it is based on the "mistaken belief that humans can exist in isolation and do not need each other" and brings with it an "unconscious sense of fear and hopelessness because individuals know they cannot survive alone in a complex society".

A decline of community: "no-one cares about each other any more"

Parallel to this growth of 'individualism', participants identified a decline in 'the community', 'community spirit', 'social solidarity' or 'community cohesion'. It was sometimes difficult to tell precisely what people meant when they referred to 'communities' but in general they seemed to mean either 'community' at the neighbourhood or local level or 'community' in a more abstract sense, referring to an engagement in public or civic matters, as opposed to private activities and concerns.

A decline of local communities: "people aren't connecting with their neighbours"

People often felt that communities at the neighbourhood level have disintegrated and said things like "neighbours don't know each other" or:

People don't care for others, in fact it is safer to walk by on the other side of the street, people don't come into contact with each other, they are isolated by their cars and their televisions.

One person saw people's preference for high hedges as a reflection of their wish to "block out other people". This decline of local communities was felt to have a detrimental effect on our lives. For example, one person identified the many consequences that spring from "not living in caring communities ... social isolation, depression, loneliness and the fear of personal and community safety". Another identified the following cycle: "The less people know their neighbours, the less they care about the neighbourhood and the more they feel alienated and scared".

Fear and distrust due to a lack of local community was a common concern although there was disagreement about whether a lack of community cohesion causes fearfulness and distrust or vice versa. Participants sometimes blamed the media for fuelling fears which undermine communities. One person worried, for example, about our “inability to trust other people so we lock up our houses, are afraid to go out, afraid to help other people etc.”. This fearfulness was identified as having a particular impact on parenting and how children are treated: for example “not letting kids play out”.

Linked to this perceived decline of community, some participants felt that individuals are increasingly disconnected from one another and suffer “loneliness and disconnection”, “isolation” and “social alienation”. Certain groups of people were identified as particularly vulnerable, for example one participant explained that “some people who live alone have more regular contact with characters from soap operas than they do with friends and neighbours”. Another felt that a decline of community “is especially hard on older people who may not speak to someone for weeks on end – a key factor in rates of depression”.

It was also felt that the relationships we do build can be dysfunctional and lack effective communication. For example, one person identified a “lack of real, meaningful, open, honest, respectful communication between people” and another described “people not listening, people not talking, and people not giving time”.

A lack of public engagement: “withdrawal from public life into private pleasure-seeking”

Other people focused not on local communities but on a decline of community in a more abstract sense, involving the rise to dominance of a set of attitudes and behaviours that serve the individual, not society. Participants identified “a lack on involvement in society by all” or a “lack of community spirit and involvement” and criticised people’s “limited desire to take a personal share of responsibility for collective problems”.

Overlapping with this issue, people also identified apathy towards other people or what one person called “social lethargy”, in particular with regard to the problems of vulnerable people in society:

It seems that people no longer care about others or the community area they live in. People are too busy making sure that they have whatever it is that makes their life easier, happier, etc. Regardless of the cost to others.

The idea that we are all only responsible for ourselves, and that we get what we deserve. Society should be about protecting the weak and vulnerable.

Social apathy. People behaving in an ego-centric way, ‘getting on with their own lives’ and not making any contribution to society and/or our environment.

New kinds of communities?

Connected to this decline of traditional kinds of communities, participants (albeit more rarely) recognised the growth of other kinds of communities.

- **Virtual communities:** the internet was perceived as “a twin-edged sword”. For example one person recognised its many advantages but described it as “a Pandora’s Box, distributing many evils into the world”. One parent explained: “It’s such a brilliant communication tool but there are no boundaries ... I am worried how I will teach my son in the future how to use the best bits and not get trapped by the worst.”

The internet was sometimes seen to damage our relationships with one another. For example one person felt that the increasing use of social networking sites and virtual games is limiting the time we spend communicating with each other face-to-face and that people (especially young people) are losing social skills as a result. People were therefore sceptical that these ‘virtual communities’ provide an adequate

substitute for more traditional types of communities and interaction.

- **Global communities:** one participant felt that local communities have been eclipsed for some people (with damaging consequences) by a global outlook:

Many people consider themselves to be liberal, intelligent, open-minded and community-spirited but don't speak to their neighbours and have no regards for their locality, preferring a global perspective on everything – [this] leads to a sense of isolation, focus on self, meaninglessness and at the extreme end a lack of regard for society resulting in all the issues we are aware of.

- **Gangs:** gangs emerged primarily as a social evil but some people recognised that they provide “an identity and a social family” for some young people and a place where they can form friendships and “feel safe and supported”. One person explained, for example, that the support provided by gangs may “outweigh any potential benefits of leaving the culture – to return to possible isolation, insecurity [and] instability”.

Consumerism and greed: “we are a throw-away society”

The issue of *consumerism and greed* was closely intertwined with the perceived trends towards individualism and away from community. One person articulated the relationship between these issues by identifying a “breakdown of moral commitment to the well-being of community, replaced by selfish acquisition and consumption”. Another person saw consumerism as the underlying factor, the “cumulative effect of which as a social force is to distract the attention of people from the suffering of others, which with concerted effort could be alleviated”.

The consultation suggests two closely intertwined manifestations of this consumer culture: the first concerning *what we are like* (greedy) and the second concerning *who we value* (celebrities).

Greed: “nothing is enough for the person for whom enough is too little”

Participants felt that greed for money and consumer goods was a pressing social evil with a host of negative consequences. This greed was seen to have eclipsed other virtues: one respondent for example explained that it “blinds society to the needs of others” and another agreed that “it makes people ruthless [and leads to] a general lack of compassion and community spirit because everyone is ‘out for themselves’”.

People were concerned that our appetite for consumer goods and wealth has divorced consumption from any concept of need: “Too many people want too much and they want it all now”. One participant suggested that “The concept of ‘enough’ needs to be reinstated” and another lamented “Our inability ... to recognise that we have more than enough, and to redirect the ‘surplus’ to those who do not, both domestically and internationally”. Several people cited the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi’s belief that “there is enough on this planet for everybody’s need, but there isn’t enough for everybody’s greed”.

There was a strong connection between this theme of greed and consumerism and concern about the environment. Indeed, many of the other evils identified in the consultation are traced back to consumerism and greed: for example, one person explained that “its tentacles reach everywhere” and another blamed consumerism for “waste and throw-away attitude, profligacy and use of finite resources, cult of the car, objectification, exploitation of target groups, exploitation of the third world”. Consumerism was also seen to fuel debt by convincing people “that they need ‘things’ to have a fulfilled life”.

Greed and consumerism were not simply conceptualised as personal vices: people felt that ‘rampant consumerism’ is ingrained in our culture rather than a personal choice and that there is a “huge cultural pressure to define worth according to consumption”:

Everything seems to be based around money and owning things. The more you have, the more successful you are. There's nothing wrong with having enough, but there's pressure on people to go for more and more.

These cultural pressures were blamed for negative impacts across the social spectrum but were seen to create particular pressures for people with lower incomes who are marginalised “by images of prosperity and a consumer culture they are not part of”. Debt and crime were identified by some participants as the only route out of this.

People frequently located responsibility for our consumerist greed in political, financial and media institutions:

It is supported by government because it is seen as the engine of the economy, geared to disposability ... It is seen as 'inevitable' and maybe 'a good thing' [and] needs challenging at a profound level.

Obsessive consumerism [is] fuelled by advertising media and banks which lend money to people who cannot afford it to buy things they do not really need.

Irresponsible television programmes ... promote unhealthy and immoral lifestyles and fuel people's desires for material goods. TV is turning our nation into unthinking uncritical consumers whose only satisfaction comes from consumption.

Celebrity culture: “the spurious cult of self-obsessed celebrity”

One participant in the consultation asked, “Where have all the real heroes and heroines gone?” This sentiment was echoed by others, who agreed that we increasingly look to celebrities as a measure of “a good life”, but that these “false gods” in fact fail to provide positive role models. On the contrary, celebrities were widely perceived to be extremely negative role models (especially for young people) who promote “vacuous ambitions”, “unrealistic expectations” and “shallow aspirations”.

An “absolute infatuation with image in modern society”, and more specifically the “tyranny of ‘ideal body shapes’”, was seen as one of the key impacts of a celebrity culture that has many negative impacts:

The celebrity, the obsession with body image, the materialist culture that creates the self-destruction of anorexia ... the adoration of beautiful, the desire to be famous and all those things that destroy self-confidence and self-esteem.

While a celebrity culture, consumerism and greed are presented here as different manifestations of the same ‘evil’, the responses also point to a tension between over-consumption and an obsession with body image. One participant gives this example: there is an “obsession with perfect body image at the same time as relentless marketing of food and eating while having a blame culture on individuals who are overweight or obese”. So consumerism places people under pressures that they cannot healthily and happily reconcile:

We judge our peers by how ‘young’ or ‘good’ they look and how much stuff they have. But we all inevitably age and all our stuff is vulnerable. We could lose it in a flood or a fire. Imagine the mental breakdown if you lose your stuff and your looks ... crikey.

For those who identify consumerism and greed as a modern social evil, there seems to be a consensus that a meaningful set of values and way of life has now been replaced by a “vacuous and unnecessary obsession with symbolic consumption and status” in which we ascribe “excessive values to the mundane and mediocre”. One person felt that “we need to stand up for the ordinary decent values that most people have instead of encouraging the ‘worship’ of immoral and amoral celebrities”.

The combination of greed and celebrity culture was blamed for undermining our relationships with each other: “Money, beauty and youth are prized over love, respect and happiness. People

are valued for superficial reasons". Moreover, this consumerist outlook was seen to damage our relationships with others by forcing people into competition: "always needing the newest and best ... leads to peer pressure, envy, unhealthy competition, bullying". Another person listed "avarice, social division, discontent, stress, unhappiness" as the impacts of consumerism and greed. Several respondents blamed this competitive consumerism for people's unhealthy work-life balance: "the drive to own the latest and best of everything is causing people to work too hard for too long, losing sight of what is really important to be happy".

Participants largely agreed that consumerism "never brings satisfaction, let alone happiness or contentment" and yet the responses reflect a strong perception that other people nevertheless seek happiness through consumption:

We are in danger of losing sight of what is important in life, like kindness, playfulness, generosity and friendship. The immaterial things that can't be bought and sold.

We can quantify money better than we can quantify happiness and contentment. So we chase it, rather like a rainbow, deceiving ourselves that it will deliver that elusive happiness and contentment.

Drugs and alcohol

Drugs and alcohol emerged as a major concern in the consultation and were often spoken about as one social evil. People identified their misuse and the "overwhelming increase" in their consumption as "a predominant factor in the social decline of today". While it was common for participants to identify drugs and alcohol themselves as social evils, it was recognised that they are intricately related to other social problems: they were often characterised as both the consequence *and* cause of many other evils.

Why people use drugs and alcohol

The responses both implicitly and explicitly gave reasons why people use and misuse drugs and alcohol. Sometimes participants criticised people who use drugs and alcohol for their choices to do so and the damaging impact this has. One view was that drug and alcohol users fail to acknowledge responsibility for their choices and their damaging consequences:

People use their addictions to justify the violence they use on others. Old people are mugged, wives/partners/girlfriends/mothers have money 'borrowed' from them to feed the habit. Then when the haze has cleared it's still someone else's fault!

A more common view however, was that the use of drugs and alcohol is a symptom of other social evils, rather than purely a personal choice. Indeed, one participant criticised the "general lack of understanding of the problems faced by those caught in the trap of [drug] addiction". Some participants focused on how readily available drugs and alcohol are. Some voiced their opposition to the government's decision to introduce new 24-hour licensing laws, while drugs were seen to be easily accessible (even to children), badly controlled by the police and cheap: "you can get heroin cheaper than a pint these days".

As well as being accessible, people also felt that using and misusing both drugs and alcohol is increasingly *acceptable*. Despite being illegal, people felt that there is complacency around the consumption of drugs, with celebrities sometimes criticised for glamorising them. The acceptability and accessibility of drugs was seen to leave young people and children particularly vulnerable and at risk of being "lured into a world of drugs before they are mature enough to understand the effects their addiction will have on themselves and their families".

A common view was that we fail to take the dangers of alcohol seriously enough: a popular culture in which "mindless drinking is accepted and encouraged" was identified. The media was

often seen to be complicit in promoting this culture:

It is in your face. It is advertised on TV and at football matches ... There are no role models saying ... I don't drink.

*Drinking is considered acceptable and even funny in all forms of the media – especially well-known TV programmes such as *Coronation Street*, *EastEnders* and other 'role model' soaps. They then ask the question 'why are our kids obsessed with booze'?!*

In this context, people were seen to be particularly likely to turn to drugs and alcohol as “a means of escape from social, economic, and other personal problems”. For example, one person described them as “Reality blockers [which] help people to forget the other social evils”: another agreed that they can “detract focus from the miseries of life”. Family breakdown, child abuse, domestic violence, poverty, stress, unemployment and lack of opportunities or education were all identified as risk factors for drugs and alcohol misuse. As such, use of drugs and alcohol was sometimes seen as a particular problem for vulnerable groups: one person explained for example how these issues are particularly acute for some young people who “do not have a great deal to do in some areas [and] therefore hang about the streets drinking”.

The impacts of drug and alcohol consumption: “a predominant factor in the social decline of today”

As well as being seen as a symptom of other social problems, drugs and alcohol were seen to be the cause of numerous other social evils. The impact of drugs (especially Class A drugs like heroin) was often seen to be more severe than that of alcohol. For example, one participant told of how her “step-daughter died from heroin use aged 30 and my step-son also died from heroin use aged 31”, while a retired headteacher explained why he perceived drugs as the worst social evil facing our society: “I witness many of my ex-pupils who have

succumbed to drug addiction. The consequences for them and their families are heartbreaking.”

People felt that – unlike some drugs – alcohol “is not an absolute evil – you can drink sensibly”. However, it was felt that people rarely do so: “We don't seem able to drink in moderation”. Indeed, the fact that consuming alcohol is legal was sometimes seen to make its damaging effects all the more pervasive. Binge drinking (especially among young people) emerged as a key social evil. For example, one person described “the perception in this country that ... you don't have a good time unless you are plastered”.

Some participants focused on the damage drugs and alcohol cause to those who consume them, including poor health, mental health problems, debt and homelessness. Drug use, and addiction in particular, was also identified as a reason for people turning to crime (especially theft) and prostitution, in order to fund their habit. Other impacts were less tangible: participants sometimes felt that drugs and alcohol undermine people's autonomy, aspirations and values. For example, one participant explained how drug addiction “strips the individual of their self-control, their conscience, their beliefs, and their values, they simply become ‘an empty vessel’ that has no use, no contribution to make, no drive”.

Drugs and alcohol were also seen to have a damaging impact on wider society. Their misuse was commonly seen to be a catalyst for family breakdown, to cause bad parenting or neglect and lead to domestic violence (this was particularly true of alcohol). Alcohol was seen to cause anti-social behaviour and violence, and to create ‘no-go areas’ in towns and cities during evenings and weekends. Drugs were also seen to damage local communities and to lead to crime. One person for example explained that:

People today live in fear of leaving their own homes, of opening their purses/wallets in the local shops, of walking alone in their own

streets for fear of being mugged or attacked, so that someone can get their next 'fix'. Get it off our streets.

Several participants also highlighted the pressures and costs placed on the National Health Service, police and courts due to drug and alcohol misuse, while drugs were also seen to form part of a wider network of 'global evils'. For example, one person explained how the drug industry is responsible for "exploitation and abuse, misery, poverty, death and addiction all along the chain, both in the UK and abroad".

Responding to the social evil of drugs

Interestingly, participants offered several suggestions about how to deal with drug use (ideas about how to deal with alcohol use were less forthcoming). Three kinds of solutions were proposed. Some felt that harsher penalties for dealers and users were necessary and criticised the "apparent lack of willingness on the part of the authorities to mete out appropriate consequences to those who deal in drugs or the users that wreak havoc in others' lives". Others focused on the need for support and rehabilitation for people with drug problems: one person for instance argued that we need "to understand the emotions that motivated the individuals to act in that way and respond appropriately". There was, however, a perception that these services are currently not in place. A third group contended that the most effective response to drug-related problems would be legalisation, a suggestion frequently justified by the perceived failure of current approaches. Participants also felt that legalisation would "cut down on crimes ... save money on time wasted by police", allow for more control over the supply of drugs and undermine the appeal of drug taking as an act of rebellion or subversion: "If all drugs were legalised then many youngsters would not try them since very often it is the fact that they are illegal that makes them attractive".

Other addictions

Although a more peripheral concern than drugs and alcohol, addiction to smoking and gambling

were also identified as social evils. In the case of smoking, people were concerned about its impact on people's health. Some praised the recent ban on smoking in public places with one person arguing for example that "it should have been banned decades ago". Others saw the smoking ban in a different light, as "paternalistic government intervention".

In the case of gambling, people felt that it can be a key cause of debt: "People have so much opportunity to fritter money away and [it is] destroying lives and making families struggle – this needs to be stopped". Online gambling was identified as a "particularly insidious [social evil] in that it may foster development in private of highly addictive behaviour". Several people criticised the government's role in supporting the gambling industry, which may reflect the fact that the survey took place in the aftermath of plans to open a series of 'super-casinos' across the UK. Others saw gambling as a manifestation of greed. For example one participant explained that gambling encourages "an attitude of effortlessly achieving what ought to be hard-worked for, and therefore helping to facilitate a mindset that sees life and its benefits as a right, rather than a contract of both rights and responsibilities".

A decline of values

One participant explained that "in the world we've created, there's no such thing as 'right and wrong' any more" and another agreed that we have "lost any form of moral compass". These responses epitomise the decline of values that people involved in the consultation often perceived in the world around them. As well as being identified as a social evil in itself, this "moral vacuum" and "disintegration of morals" was seen to be fertile base from which other 'evils' can grow. For example one person explained that "We no longer know the difference between right and wrong. If no one can be wrong then anything goes and we break down into lawlessness." The idea that 'anything goes' was expressed again and again: people felt that actions were

determined by people's wants rather than their obligations, one person describing this as "The 'I'm alright Jack' ... mentality".

There are strong links here with the theme of 'individualism': people were described as pursuing their own desires "even if it means other people get less or that others are hurt in the process". There is also a clear connection between this theme and the greed and consumerism discussed earlier. People don't feel that the passion for material things has allowed room for a moral concern for others; rather, participants felt that a hedonistic culture has evolved in which "we value things over people" not as well as people. One person for example described how "ethical behaviour and supportive relationships" have been broken down "by promoting individual well-being, greed, competition, win and lose mentalities and material wealth at the expense of collaboration and community well-being".

This theme was also intertwined with several other themes that will be discussed later in the paper, including the decline of religion:

There is no longer any solid foundation to the moral choices made by many people shaping our society. This used to be provided by the Christian faith which even those with no personal faith broadly adhered to. Now 'everyone does what is right in his own eyes', without any outside reference or higher authority.

It was not only people with religious beliefs who recognised the impact of a decline of religion on our values:

Although an atheist myself I agree ... that decline in belief in Christianity has unhinged people's moral compass ... We need other bases for morality that do not require such beliefs.

As an atheist, I don't believe that religious authority is the proper basis for an enduring challenge to consumerism within

contemporary society. Yet I regret the absence of any potent force that seems able to, a) provide a check on the corporate-driven impetus which substantially drives this aspect of our culture, b) promote values based on treating other people with decency, kindness and charity, c) encourages us to value people better for such acts – as opposed to conspicuous consumption.

One person suggested that "Perhaps our worst evil is lack of genuine moral leadership" and this sentiment was echoed by other participants who pointed to the failure of the church "to provide strong moral leadership", but who also perceived a lack of "respected role models" in the home, in schools, in communities, in politics and in the media and celebrity realm.

The breakdown or decline of the traditional family was also seen to be undermining a shared value system: participants often spoke of the "loss", "erosion" or "abandonment of good old moral family values". Without families, people felt there is "no one to guide youngsters in basic morals and requirements of civilised society". For others, it was less the breakdown of the family, but poor parenting that was responsible for a decline of values. One person felt for example that "many parents don't have a clue how to raise their children as decent human beings".³

This decline of values was mainly spoken about in a general sense, but the responses also highlight some particular qualities or virtues whose absence in contemporary Britain was felt to be a social evil. The themes already discussed in this paper suggest the absence of selflessness and temperance as virtues informing people's behaviour. In addition, honesty, tolerance, empathy and compassion, respect and reciprocity also emerged as virtues which too rarely inform people's behaviour.

³ It is worth noting that some respondents saw the breakdown of the family and poor parenting to be the consequence rather than the cause of a decline of values.

Tolerance

Intolerance, bigotry and stereotyping were all cited as social evils. Participants felt that people are intolerant in general “towards people who are different” and that this can lead to prejudice and discrimination. Two specific manifestations of intolerance emerged particularly strongly in the consultation. Firstly, homophobia.⁴ Homophobia in schools was highlighted by several participants and others stressed the role that religion can play in encouraging intolerance on the basis of sexuality. Secondly, cultural, racial and religious intolerance.⁵ This issue will be discussed later on.

Honesty

A “lack of honesty and integrity” were also cited as social evils. One person for instance felt that people believe “self-control, personal integrity and care for the welfare of others are virtues too old-fashioned/difficult to be bothered with”. However, dishonesty and deception were social evils more usually attributed to institutions rather than individuals, in particular the media and government. These institutions are discussed in depth elsewhere in this report.

Empathy and compassion

These are virtues that people felt were integral to a healthy society. One person described empathy and understanding as “the foundations of society” and another felt that “lack of empathy ... perpetuates all manner of wrongs”. Despite their crucial role, they were felt to be increasingly absent from people’s outlook. One person for instance identified a “total lack of respect and empathy shown by a part of society for other human beings” and others felt that “some people just don’t seem to understand that other people are thinking, feeling humans; they really seem to lack empathy, and it’s quite frightening”. Another agreed that “we don’t recognise the humanity of others around us, and we don’t see enough of ourselves in others to give us an adequate

sense of empathy for what others in our world experience”.

Greed, inequality and social division, anti-social behaviour, neglect and intolerance were all identified as consequences of a lack of empathy and compassion and phenomena such as human trafficking were often cited as reflecting our lack of concern for human life: “That human beings are being bought and sold is an indictment of society”. One person prescribed the following: “One must simply think of how life is in another person’s shoes. By doing this, we will become more compassionate to help the poor and refrain from inflicting mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical pain on others.”

Several groups were identified as particular victims of this social evil. They were: asylum seekers; children and young people; elderly people (especially those in need of care) as well as “those who are disadvantaged by poverty, disability, race and gender” and “those who fall through the safety net, young people in care, drug abusers, older people in poverty, homeless etc.”.

Respect

Participants commonly identified “a general lack of respect on all sides”, “lack of respect for everything and everyone” and a “lack of respect for other people in all areas of life”. Other participants highlighted an absence of respect for “people, property, personal space”, “for other people’s well-being, views, feelings”, “for human life, one’s own body, other people and other people’s property” and “for each other[s] rights to be, and achieve happiness”. Other participants were more specific in their identification of this social evil and pointed to particular victims and perpetrators. Several groups of people were identified as particularly exposed to this lack of respect:

- “public servants, particularly those in our caring and emergency services, and most of all, the violence they are often subjected to”;
- “essential workers like nurses, teachers and firemen”;
- “those who do most of the daily and

⁴ A very small number of participants identified homosexuality itself as a ‘social evil’.

⁵ A very small number of responses were themselves racist.

important tasks in society, e.g. police, teachers, nurses”;

- “authority figures – in the home, in society generally (police etc.) – at national level (politicians)”;
- “women, religions, races”;
- “the vulnerable in society, i.e. the elderly and children”.

Young people were often criticised as lacking respect for other people, and for older people more specifically, but several participants felt that this lack of respect ran both ways:

People not respecting each other. I don't just mean young people having no respect for older people, it works the other way as well – some older people tar youngsters with the 'nasty' and 'ill-mannered' brush when they do the same. It pervades all parts of society.

Some people felt that it wasn't lack of respect that is a social evil, but rather “respect for the wrong things”. This person goes on to ask “what does it take for a kid to get respect? Certainly not helping out an elderly neighbour or showing any signs of a rounded education. Respect is saved for those very social evils that blight our communities.” Another person feels that having ‘respect’ is no longer a virtue as “‘respect’ among certain groups in society means fear”.

Some people felt that lack of self-respect was a more fundamental ‘evil’ than lack of respect for others, because it “leads to misuse of drugs, including alcohol, or other forms of violence, which is often turned against wider society” or because “if you love and respect yourself then you will act towards others in the same way which would then begin to repair our fractured and loveless relationships, society, world”.

Reciprocity

Another common theme in the responses was that people in contemporary Britain have an “attitude of ‘entitlement’ to everything without any thought that work or effort might be necessary”. Another person identified a “lack of

understanding that with rights come responsibilities” and another “a culture of rights, without responsibilities”. “People expect that they have a right to all manner of things, but have little interest in making personal sacrifice for the general good.” People who “believe that they have a right to live well, without putting in any work ... i.e. living off benefits and giving nothing back to society and instilling the same feelings in their children” were a common example cited by respondents of this absence of ‘reciprocity’.

Most frequently, people who discussed this issue felt that people shirk their responsibilities, but other participants argued that it is unfair to expect some people to fulfil their responsibilities, when their own needs or rights are not being met. This response draws out this point:

We blame far too much on our young people, we provide them with appalling role models in terms of violence on film and in computer games ... Lack of decent education and opportunities leaves our young people feeling they have nothing to live for ... And people that feel they have nothing to lose are a danger to themselves and others because they can lose any sense of social responsibility. We expect our young to abide by strict and ever-changing rules and demands of social responsibilities, yet forget that rights must always go alongside responsibilities. If we chip away all those rights, then we in turn have no right to expect young people to abide by often draconian rules and responsibilities imposed by adults.

Furthermore, many of the themes in the consultation point to certain vulnerable groups who participants feel should be accorded more help and a more robust set of rights: so while the need for people to fulfil their responsibilities is a key theme in the consultation, the reciprocal duty of society to ensure that people are in a position to do this is also important.

Families and young people

The consultation shows that young people are a source of major concern for people, but participants varied in how they saw young people fitting into a debate about social evils. Some perceived young people to be the *perpetrators* of social evil, whereas others felt that young people are the *victims* of social evils and in particular suffer because of problems within the family. These two perspectives will be considered in more depth below, but it is worth noting that other participants identified a connection between the “appalling way we treat so many of our children” and the “irresponsible and uncontrollable behaviour of youths”. For example:

[There are] not enough things for the youth of today to do which leaves them bored and then they cause havoc ... there should be more youth clubs for them to attend.

How young people behave: “they seem to have lost all respect for human life”

Some participants were very critical about “the youth of today” and “youth culture”. One participant described how young people have “no manners, no self-control, no respect for anything” and another explained that some young people are “switched off from the common goals of our society”, a sentiment that ran through the responses. They were often identified as a group involved in other social evils, including drugs, alcohol, crime and violence. There was a particularly strong connection between the theme of young people and gangs: those responding clearly perceived gangs (and associated gun and knife crime) to be a youth problem. The responses reveal a great deal of fear about gang culture. For example, one person said: “It terrifies me. Kids egging each other on to do something daring or brave, otherwise they will seem uncool in front of their mates ... [it] can lead to dangerous consequences.” Another was concerned about:

... gang culture among young adults in which most members are carrying knives and have

no fear of using them. Even youngsters who do not wish to join are made to or are threatened with violence.

One participant emphasised that this is not just a problem that adults face: “I’m a teenager, and adults seem to think we don’t suffer just because we’re the same age as them [teenage gangs] so they’ll leave us alone”.

How young people are treated: “criminalised, abused, neglected and ignored at every turn”

Other participants were not prepared to vilify young people, even if they recognised that their behaviour can sometimes be problematic. One person for example explained that “young people are growing up in such pressured circumstances and have to be so tough to survive and succeed”. Another participant felt that “there is a wealth of potential in young people yet they tend to be stigmatised rather than encouraged”. On a similar note, one person criticised “negative, pessimistic, cynical, critical adults not appreciating young people for their qualities and abilities and the contributions they can and do make to society”. Some participants felt that these factors undermine the self-respect and self-worth of young people: “We need to find ways to bring up children to believe they have value as human beings”. This lack of self-respect was perceived as fertile bedrock upon which other social evils can flourish: “If you really cared about yourself you wouldn’t choose self-destructive behaviour”. One person connected this issue to the need of some people to bully others – “in order to feel that you did something, you caused an effect”.

One person summarised these concerns by asking the following question:

How can we wring our hands at the state of the youth of today, when they are criminalised, abused, neglected and ignored at every turn? How can we expect their generation to make the state of society better, when we provide such a poor role model?

The consultation suggests that young people are being failed by many institutions that should support them. Schools, for example, were criticised for failing to provide the right opportunities for young people. The media was also seen to have a negative effect on young people, who were described as “particularly susceptible and impressionable” to the patterns of behaviour and lifestyles portrayed in television and films, computer games, the internet and advertising. Furthermore, the media was seen to fuel what one participant described as the “madness of blaming our young people for society’s problems”. One person explained how young people are “portrayed on TV as if they have no morals; this is not my experience of most young people”. The most important institution that participants felt was failing young people however, was the family.

Families and parenting: “Families are crucial to a healthy society, yet we’re collectively undermining their value”

Participants who spoke about the family were primarily concerned with two related issues: family breakdown and poor parenting.

Numerous participants saw the breakdown of the family as a major social evil: “Family breakdown ... is probably the biggest cross-cutting issue society faces because it impacts on so many other things”. People disagreed, however, about the importance of traditional family structure. This is illustrated in the difference between the following two responses:

Breakdown of the family structure, whether single-parent or not, the lack of a cohesive family unit and the support of the wider family and the values that brings.

Loss of the family structure, women being wives, mothers, home-makers. Men being bread-winners, head of the home.

Other participants focused not on the breakdown of family structures, but on poor parenting:

Irresponsible, uninformed, ill-educated, unprincipled parenting ... which sadly leads inescapably and directly to many of the problems seen, heard, smelt, felt and experienced in almost every city, town (and many villages) across the length and breadth of the country involving ‘young people’ ... all of which are merely the symptoms of this real social evil ...

Participants agreed that poor parenting has a host of negative impacts, including that it makes some children “impossible to teach” and leads to anti-social behaviour. While people sometimes held parents responsible for this social evil, others identified a “lack of support for parents and parenting” and a “lack of education on basic parenting skills and lack of emotional support for struggling families” and felt that “people need teaching how to be parents because it is not an automatic thing that happens when you have a child”. This need was seen to be particularly strong for young parents. One person for example pointed out the absurdity that “we expect young people to somehow know how to be good parents” and another emphasised that young mothers “don’t have the experience, wisdom or emotional maturity to rear children”, a sentiment that lay behind some people’s concerns about teenage pregnancy.

Young people and the economy

As well as the problems young people face within families, there was also concern about their situation in the current economy. Three specific areas of concern emerged: firstly, some young people were facing an increasingly competitive and insecure labour market. Particular concern was expressed for “low skills-based school leavers”, especially in the context of a decline of the manufacturing sector. One woman explained the different opportunities that she and her husband had had in comparison to today’s young people:

[There is a] lack of social mobility/secure financial future for young people ... [it’s] difficult to gain employment [and] once gained

likely, initially, to be agency/temporary/short-term contract work with poor conditions of employment ... In contrast both my husband and myself ... finished school on a Friday and started work on the following Monday at age 16 in permanent jobs with good conditions and then gained promotion by age 18.

Secondly, the consultation revealed concerns about the “difficulties young people face in finding affordable housing”, mainly due to the “extortionate price of housing relative to incomes”. Lastly, debt was perceived to be a particular problem for some young people, partly because they have increasingly easy access to credit. There was also concern about the financial problems facing young people in higher education.

The disconnection between young and old people

One person identified a “growing gulf between the old and the young”, a social evil which another participant described as “generational alienation”. This person pointed to “the apparent lack of recognition of our interdependence”. Another felt that there has been a “reduction in inter-generational communication, learning and respect” and one participant observed that negative attitudes towards young people are “fostering a climate of mistrust and dislike, if not hatred, between generations. This reduces the interaction between generations and hardens entrenched attitudes”. Another participant agreed that because there is so little communication or contact between generations, “each group blames each other for society’s ills”.

If ‘generational alienation’ is the social evil then the findings discussed in this section must be interpreted in a different light: the fears and concerns expressed about young people may wholly or partly be the result of a lack of communication and interaction between generations, in combination with the media’s portrayal of young people.

Inequality and poverty

Inequality and poverty emerged as major themes in the consultation. They were often described as fundamental issues underpinning other social problems:

Poverty – this can take many forms but is at its most extreme as debilitating as a life-shortening illness. It exacerbates many other forms of discrimination and disadvantage that exist within our society and is one of the hardest barriers to overcome. It cripples whole families, communities and generations of people.

Inequality ... This is one of the root causes of the increase in crime and in dissatisfaction in modern society. I believe that a more equal society would make everyone happier, both rich and poor.

Poverty: “the keystone to other social problems”

Participants expressed frustration at the perceived lack of action or commitment to tackling poverty. For example, one person explained that poverty is a social evil in part “because it can be overcome” and another identified the “worst social evil today [as] the government’s failure to prioritise helping the poor, the homeless and those whose lives are ruined by poverty. Given adequate means, people’s lives could be far more enjoyable.” This powerful response ties together many of the issues discussed by other participants in relation to poverty:

Poverty. Over and above everything that we hear about in relation to social evils ... the issue of poverty is the one that has direct effect over the other possible choices. Until this issue is resolved we condemn too many people to bleak futures where their only ‘choice’ is a cycle of unemployment, benefit, (possibly crime), a feeling of worthlessness, disenfranchisement and lack of opportunity. By continuing to ‘keep’ people locked in to a life of poverty ... things like anti-social

behaviour will continue to be a problem (why should people care about anyone else when no one cares about them?), drinking and taking drugs will continue to be an issue (what else is there to do?), and inevitably people will turn to crime (you need money to buy the things we are told we need!).

Participants explained how poverty “leads people to feel their lives are worthless, and diminishes any form of hope, resulting in apathy and degeneration” and how it leaves people with “no hope for the future”. Others highlighted the particular problems experienced by “people living in deprived areas where there is bad housing, schools and parenting leading to crime, drug use and gangs”.

Poor health and educational disadvantage were also associated with poverty. The ways in which these multiple dimensions of poverty were highlighted suggests that participants in the consultation saw poverty as an issue much wider than just low income. Poor housing and homelessness were frequently highlighted as an indication of poverty and disadvantage.

Poor housing and homelessness

Homelessness was described by one person as “the most extreme manifestation of disadvantage”. Another explained why a “lack of good quality housing” is such an important social evil:

Surely having a dry and warm place to live is a basic human right in the same way access to health care, education, free speech, etc. makes our society civilised. This doesn't mean a rabbit hutch of a dwelling with wobbly walls, but meeting minimum standards set by social scientists to afford mental well-being.

Participants highlighted the inadequate assistance accorded to homeless people, in particular in England: “Too many people haven't got anywhere to live and I don't think enough is being done to help with this problem”. Lack of affordable housing (to buy and rent) was a common theme: one person for instance described the “unrelenting pressure and stress

on individuals, couples and families, to earn enough money to obtain decent housing”. The high cost of housing was seen to be a particular problem in the context of a “lack of affordable social housing” and participants identified a “drastic need for more social housing for people in dire straits”. Others criticised the lack of investment in, decline of and stigma attached to, social housing.

Several people felt that the housing market is serving a purpose for wealthy investors and developers rather than meeting social needs: “[it is] so exploited by speculators that it has lost its raison d'être – to provide a roof over everyone's head and an affordable and stable home for every family”. Buy-to-let mortgages and second-home-ownership were singled out by some participants as fuelling these problems.

Inequality: “it is immoral that some people acquire huge bonuses while others struggle”

Participants in the consultation pointed to the “enormous and growing gap between the rich and the poor” as a social evil in itself and as something that “nurtures the other ‘evils’”. That there are “still large numbers of people living in poverty” was perceived to be an all the more acute evil “in such an affluent country”. This affluence signalled to some that poverty could have and should have been tackled: “Increased prosperity should have meant that no one should face absolute poverty in this country, but that is not so. There are intense pockets of poverty and deprivation where the state and society as a whole seems to have given up.” Another person said: “It makes me feel ashamed to live in a society where the problem and solution are so obvious but there is no political will to address it”.

The feeling that inequality has been accepted in our society ran through the responses. Some participants emphasised the obligations of ‘wealthy people’ whom one person described as “disengaged or indifferent”. “In the UK we all seem to be brainwashed into thinking it has to be this way – the ‘haves’ really should mobilise

or be mobilised to reverse this process.” Another person felt that the “real barrier to social progress for the excluded is the attitude of the included – always was, always will be”. One participant argued that “in Britain in 2007 this sort of inequality should be considered no. 1 on any prime minister’s ‘to do’ list. Those who are greedy will have to be persuaded that it is their moral duty to pay higher taxes.” This reflected the concerns of many people regarding the “astronomical wealth” or “obscene pay rises/bonuses” of some individuals.

One key reason people perceived inequality as a social evil was that “people do not have fair access to the wealth of western society”. One person felt, for example, that it was unacceptable that some “individuals [are] not able to live above a poverty standard even though they are putting in an eight-hour day”. Other participants also made the point that people’s efforts in the workplace don’t necessarily translate into a fair income:

People working in such jobs as the retail sector, call centres, factories, as factory operatives, market researchers [are] not appreciated nor rewarded, and the hierarchy of companies which use [a] large amount of people doing these jobs profit enormously whilst the workers upon whose contribution the company depends are undervalued.

We should not have a society where footballers are paid hundreds and thousands of pounds whilst a family is expected to exist on a pittance.

Single mothers and pensioners ... often have to live a week on what some high earners spend on tips.

Some participants focused on the role of our economic system in underpinning this unfair distribution: one person explained for example how it “concentrates enormous wealth and unaccountable power in the hands of a few”. Echoing the concerns of other participants, one identified “global capitalism” as a social evil,

connecting it to other social ills including inequality, environmental degradation and consumerism:

No doubt it could be made to work in a very different way, but the way it is working, at least as I see it, is: 1) it redistributes wealth (not just money) from the poor to the already rich; there are too few beneficiaries and too many casualties. 2) it’s destroying the capacity of the planet to support life – any life not just our own. 3) it doesn’t make us happy. Indeed, in order that we should continue to consume its products, it needs to keep us unhappy – and persuade us that ever more stuff is the same as happiness.

Several people highlighted the role of the housing market in fuelling inequality: “The gap between the owners and renters is widening and leading to social division”. Another agreed that “two-thirds of the population, will, as home-owners, leave equity to their offspring, while the other one-third will not, the gap will become even greater leading to greater divisions in our society”.

This perception that inequality “creates division within communities” was another key reason why inequality was identified as a social evil. People felt “the huge and increasing gap between rich and poor ... is fracturing society, one section cordoned off in its private education, healthcare, foreign trips etc.; the other resentful and envious”. Another participant offered one explanation for why inequality can undermine social cohesion: it enables “the rich to buy themselves out of the society we are creating, the less rich to aspire to buy themselves out of that society and the poor to feel dispossessed and powerless. So whole swathes of society have no investment in making it a success.”

Institutions, apathy and a democratic deficit

A range of issues relating to key social institutions emerged in the consultation. These responses highlight the ways in which the

government, schools, businesses and the media are seen to cause and perpetuate many social evils.

The government

Dissatisfaction with the political system is a clear theme to emerge from the consultation. Some participants cited “the government”, “politicians”, “national leaders” or “the state” as social evils. People criticised political actors (at both the national and local level) for being dishonest: one participant for example felt that deception is now “seen as a legitimate way to either retain power or to promote a certain ideology” and another agreed “politicians lie to get themselves elected, but face no accountability for promises not kept”. Others described politicians as “power hungry” or “self-serving” and felt that politicians are “completely out of touch with reality” and “more interested in power than they are in the people”. One participant argued that “we should have people elected not because they want to be politicians but because they care and are good”. Other participants criticised the government for offering only “short-term solutions: politicians don’t seem able to truly think beyond the next election which is why things that could really make a difference to life are not actioned”.

As has been noted elsewhere in this report, ‘the government’ was often criticised for failing to take action on other social evils, including poverty and inequality, drug and alcohol use and immigration. In this sense then, the political system was seen not as a social evil in itself but as failing to remedy and rectify other evils. Other participants made the opposite accusation: not that the government is doing too little but that it is doing too much. This criticism took two different forms however: some participants felt that the government or state is too active in providing welfare and services to people through a “plethora of political and social initiatives” and that this “is encouraging people to look to the government to solve all their problems” and therefore “undermining individual and local initiative” and “personal responsibility and accountability”. The “nanny state”, “big

government”, “authoritarianism” and “welfare dependency” were often cited as social evils in connection with this issue.

Other participants were less concerned that the provision of public services and government initiatives might undermine personal responsibility, and more concerned that legislative reforms are increasingly “telling people how to live their lives” and “restricting personal freedoms”. One example of these “overly intrusive” measures was the smoking ban. A more common concern, however, was the idea that Britain is turning into a “surveillance society”. One person expressed this common worry saying “we are constantly under surveillance – more so than any other country in the world”. The possible introduction of ID cards and the increased use of CCTV were frequently cited as example of this “Big Brother attitude”.

There was a strong connection between this theme and terrorism, which participants often felt was the motivation for measures that risk eroding personal freedoms. Participants disagreed, however, about whether terrorism is a valid justification for these measures. Several people agreed that terrorism is “being used as a catch-all excuse for further government encroachment upon citizens’ lives and restricting freedoms”.

A democratic deficit

People often focused not on the failings of government per se, but on the relationship between political institutions and the public. They felt that “we have no control over what the government do” due to the “ever widening gap between the political classes ... and the remainder of the population”. Another participant similarly identified a “lack of connection between policy-makers and those who have to implement the policies or are subject to them”. The consultation suggests two reasons for this disconnection, which are summed up in this response: “We either don’t care enough to put ourselves out, or we don’t think we can do anything about the things that we think are concerning or unjust”.

So, some people focused on the apathy of individuals, manifested in “low turnout” at elections and the view that “my vote won’t make any difference”, but also in people’s broader “indifference toward social problems”. One participant criticised people’s cynicism towards, and mistrust of, political elites:

People behave as though politicians are ‘other’ and are all corrupt, and yet are happy to benefit from the fact that others are prepared to step up to the task and take the difficult decisions that deliver us a functioning society; similarly, those most willing to criticise seem least willing to participate in any way.

Other people blamed the democratic deficit not on the apathy of individuals but on their alienation from the political institutions that are supposed to provide the opportunity for participation and engagement. Some people focused on the voting system which allows the election of a government that has “had more votes cast against it than for it”. Others focused on the lack of choice between different candidates and the “sense of alienation from the democratic process” that this creates: “Voters are not apathetic, they just don’t have a choice any more”. Other non-democratic institutions, namely big business and the media, were also seen to have an unjustified influence on political decisions, reflecting that fact that “control lies increasingly in the hands of the few”. A number of participants cited the Iraq war as a reflection a “lack of real democracy”:

When so many did stand up and say ‘not in my name’ before the war – what difference did it make? We must make those who claim to be leading democracy accountable when they mislead or act with poor judgement.

A fairly sizeable group of participants focused on the unfairness and bias of local government Ombudsmen: the analysis of the website responses suggests that these participants were directed to the social evils website from a blog showcasing the failings of this mechanism for redress against public institutions, but their

concerns echo a broader theme that emerged that public institutions are unaccountable.

The education system

The consultation reflects a feeling that a good education system is a necessary foundation for a good society. This person explained the potential power of the education system to mitigate or even overcome other social evils:

[It] could be the basis for addressing the break-up of communities and lack of collective responsibility for our young people . . . it could be a forum to replace religious worship which has had some unifying potential in homogenous communities in the past.

Another person described education as “the only viable vehicle for liberating people from their lives/circumstances”. The responses suggest, however, that the education system fails to live up to its potential. For example, one participant recognised that education (and in particular university) offers the “promise of social mobility” but in reality by “saddling the poor with debt [it] makes sure they never leave their social classifications”. Another person describes “a depressing education system which constructs difference and serves to validate disparities in wealth and income”. Participants were also concerned that not everybody has access to a good quality education:

There is no guarantee that a child can get a decent education unless it is paid for and this is a scary situation that is not set to get any better in the near future. Some state schools are fantastic but it seems to be pot luck as to whether there is a good school in a particular catchment area.

I think private education should be banned. So long as people can opt out of state education it will never improve. State education needs to be good enough for everyone, not just those who can’t afford anything better.

Another key concern raised about the education system was its perceived over-emphasis on “the

importance of academic ability over practical skills” and its failure to “develop the full potential of those who are not academically talented”. There was wide support for introducing “vocational training as a valued alternative”. Related to this point, people felt that the schooling system is too target-driven, too focused on examinations, and fails to provide children with a rounded education. People were worried that this would alienate rather than inspire some young people. One person, for example, felt that “the current system is too formal too soon and creates a sense of failure and disillusionment for many young children”.

Another asked:

What does an exam pass mean if you can't actually sit down, communicate with another person, have control of your own emotions, actively listen and empathise with people on an individual level, aspire to greatness, have confidence in what you want to achieve whilst knowing that there is a system there to support you?

The consultation also identified some groups of young people who were felt to be particularly vulnerable to the failings of the education system: children with special needs and/or disabilities, children who are excluded from school, children from lower income families or deprived areas and children who are less able or not academic.

The media

When speaking about the media, respondents seemed to be employing a fairly broad definition encompassing newspapers, magazines, television, films, computer games and advertisements. One person described the media as “a tool that ... could be a tremendous way of improving the lives of so many by educating/informing/discussing the issues that matter”. The overwhelming impression from the consultation, however, is that it fails to fulfil this potential and is widely considered to be a social evil. People recognised that the media is a “very powerful tool for changing people’s minds” and

felt that it undermines our ability to accurately perceive social problems, creating barriers to their effective resolution. It was seen to fuel intolerance, promote unhealthy lifestyles (including unhealthy eating and drug and alcohol use) and encourage materialism and greed. The main complaints brought against media institutions were their tendency to:

- **Sensationalise and trivialise:** participants commented that the media is “dumbing down” and contributing to the vacuous consumer culture described earlier. One person for instance described the “trivialisation of intelligent debate by the media, especially the tabloid press. It promotes an anti-learning culture.” Another explained how the media breeds “comfortable ignorance” because of its tendency to “trivialise issues, at best, or ignore important issues, at worst”. Other participants agreed that the media tends to “leave genuine issues ignored” and propagates “simplistic impressions of social conditions, relationships and people”.
- **Misrepresent the facts:** people felt that the media conveys an overly negative view of the world and (as one person explains) feeds the “belief that bad news is all the news”. Another person explained how the media hypes up “activities that have been happening for time immemorial, problematic youths, binge drinking etc.” and another felt that this means the media promotes “moral panic rather than workable solutions”. One response highlighted the tension between the profit motive of newspapers and broader social aims: “whipping up indignation may sell newspapers, and reinforce prejudice, but does nothing for social cohesion”. More than presenting a distorted view of the world, other participants felt that the media conveys factually inaccurate information. One person, for example, complained about the “inept and naive reporting of statistics by the media” and another explained that “TV news in particular has become entertainment-based with lack of accuracy, balance and depth”.

Big business

“Big companies”, “multi-national corporations” and “big business” are another collection of institutions that were identified as social evils in this consultation. People’s concerns focused on the inconsistency between the profit motive of these organisations and broader social needs: some people went further than noting this tension, identifying the “greed and amorality of big business”. This person’s response was typical:

Big companies ... aim solely to make a profit, ignoring the needs of people, exploiting the planet, and pressuring governments to make policies which support their financial aims. These make the few rich richer, and widen the gap globally between rich and poor both within countries and between countries.

There were strong connections between this theme and the issues of consumerism and greed discussed earlier. For example, one participant blamed the behaviour of both producers and consumers for the “consumerisation of our society”.

Supermarkets were sometimes singled out and seen to “promote unhealthy lifestyles, damage the livelihoods of farmers and smaller businesses”. One person blamed the fact that “major food companies put profit before health” for the “epidemic of obesity”. Another participant focused on the impact of supermarkets “forcing out small local shops and homogenising our retail experience”.

So, many different concerns were raised in relations to institutions. Overall, these responses suggests that the political system, media and business, far from meeting the needs of the public, often contribute to the social evils that they could and should be alleviating.

The six themes that have so far been discussed stood out as particularly dominant issues in the consultation. Six more themes remain to be considered. While these were less dominant than those discussed above, they are clearly very important issues that participants in the consultation felt strongly about.

Violence and crime

A number of issues surrounding violence and crime were identified as social evils (including drug use, already discussed above) and people who spoke about violence and crime often thought that these are bigger problems than they have been in the past: for example one said that “the UK has turned into a violent society”. Another explained how crime “affects everyone ... It affects how we live our lives on a day-to-day basis – where we go, how we get there, what type of car we have and where we park it.” Some people focused on fear of crime as a social evil and not crime itself: “People should feel free and relaxed to get on with their lives. But far too many live in fear of someone committing a crime against them.”

Violence and aggression: “people resort to violence for what seems like fairly trivial provocation”

Gun and knife crime was sometimes identified as a social evil, especially in urban areas, and the issue was often connected to gang culture. Others focused not on violent acts, but on aggressive attitudes more generally. One person explained for example that “people of all genders, classes and ages seem more angry and likely to react aggressively against someone, whether verbally or through violence”. Another agreed that “even a walk to the shop to get some milk is a trip fraught with aggression, hostility and apprehension”. Other participants cited anti-social behaviour as a social evil. One person explained that “even if [anti-social behaviour] doesn’t cause any physical harm, it can be intimidating and scary ... people should feel free and relaxed to get on with their lives, not frightened of what might happen”.

Child abuse and neglect: “I am constantly reminded of the fact that children are not safe”

Another specific crime that was cited as a social evil was child abuse and neglect: people voiced concern that it “seems to be on the increase”. Child abuse “robs [children] of their childhood and the damage is very difficult to repair. The victims are often adults before they can ever admit to having suffered. Their whole lives and that of their families are affected.” Several people felt that this is a “hidden social evil” or “a widely unrecognised problem” because it can happen within families and sometimes “involves people who you wouldn’t think would act in that kind of way”.

Several people highlighted the fears of parents in protecting their children from child abuse, but others highlighted the detrimental impact that parental fears over child safety can have on children. For example one person felt that “children’s lives are being stunted by parental fears keeping many of them out of the public realm. This means children do not learn the skills of social interaction, empathy, consideration and understanding of others in the way older generations have done.”

Responses to crime

Several participants felt that the criminal justice and penal systems were ill-equipped to prevent and respond to these issues. For example, one person identified a “lack of real deterrents to crime” and another felt that “the criminal justice system is too soft as it never seems to sentence criminals to time in prison that is appropriate to their crimes”. Paedophiles in particular were felt to face lenient sentences. Participants also highlighted the low conviction rates for rape.

A smaller group of people pointed, however, to the “misperception that crime can be ‘cured’ by incarcerating increasing numbers of people” and criticised the “growing use of prison as a response to social problems”. Some participants felt that custodial sentences were not the correct response for “people who would benefit more from psychiatric help or advice”.

Another person agreed that it was not appropriate to send “borderline criminals to prison when forethought through teaching of social skills and educational opportunities would give such people a better chance of adapting to society”.

Gender inequality

Some participants felt that “women are still at a disadvantage in society” and identified this as a key social evil. People focused on a number of particular manifestations of gender inequality.

Attitudes to and representation of women: “society’s entire attitude to women is evil”

Misogyny and other negative attitudes towards women emerged as an important social evil. Representations of women in the media and popular culture were often identified as degrading and blamed for perpetuating damaging attitudes: “Gender equality will not be obtained as long as women and girls are perceived by the media and society as sexualised commodities”. The idea that women are represented “as mindless sex objects rather than as valued members of the human species” was a common one.

Several participants worried in particular about the impact of this “objectification of women” on young women and their aspirations: “It is becoming ever harder for young women to establish an identity which is not built on a male idea of who they should be. So much for emancipation.” Less commonly, it was also recognised that “both men and women are limited by narrow cultural constructions of gender”.

Discrimination against women: “women are still at a disadvantage in society”

Other participants focused on the pay gap between men and women as well as other problems they face in the workplace, including bullying, harassment and inflexibility in the face of women’s care duties. People also pointed to discrimination against women in other spheres:

“We do not recognise and reward unpaid work, such as caring, that is mainly carried out by women and keeps the country going”. Women were also identified as marginalised voices in “important debates about national security, international policy, economic strategy, education and even creativity”.

Domestic abuse: “so much abuse is condoned by turning a blind eye”

Domestic violence was a common evil identified in the consultation. One person described the effects of violence in the home: “Home should be a safe and nurturing place and instead is a prison – terrifying and unsafe with no escape. The psychological effects on women and children last for ever.” A number of respondents cited figures and statistics pointing to the pervasiveness of this problem and participants often felt that this was a hidden social evil. One reason suggested for this is that domestic violence often goes unreported, but people also felt that society condones such abuse by “turning a blind eye or not believing it is right to interfere in ‘personal’ matters”. Other participants felt that domestic violence is “not given the credibility or importance as a crime that it should be”.

In addition to domestic violence, participants in the consultation were also keen to highlight other forms of abuse. One explained, for example, that “abuse is wide-ranging with combinations of physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and financial abuse as well as social isolation. It is a huge problem.” It’s important to point out that while the majority of people citing domestic violence or abuse of other kinds focused on women as victims, several highlighted that men too can be subject to such abuse.

As well as suffering abuse in the home, participants also pointed to the violence and abuse women face more generally. The following response catalogues the issues that one respondent feels women face: “Rape and sexual violence, sexual harassment, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, forced and

early marriage, forced prostitution, trafficking, sexual exploitation, crimes in the name of honour, sexual exploitation and stalking”. As noted in the last section, there was a concern that rape is not taken seriously enough by the police, as evidenced by low conviction rates.

Exploitation of women: “commercial sexual exploitation ... reduces women to the status of a piece of meat”

The trafficking of women into the sex industry, prostitution and pornography also emerged as social evils. For example, one participant explained that these things “reduce women to the status of a piece of meat by objectifying, degrading and isolating them, therefore making them easy to dismiss and dispose of”. Human trafficking emerged as a social evil independently of concerns about gender, but was often seen as a particular risk for women and girls.

A number of participants highlighted pornography as a social evil. For example, one described an “explosion of pornography [which is] now even available from Tesco. No wonder there are so many sex-related crimes and modern society respects women so little. Women are exploited in dirty media and so are the unthinking masses who subscribe to it!” Other participants lamented the “promotion and normalisation of pornography” or the “social acceptability and endorsement of porn” on the internet, in computer games and in other forms of entertainment and media and felt that it:

Damages many people’s understanding of humanity and healthy psychological (and sexual) relationships, particularly resulting in aggressive and violent behaviour towards women, much more so than say ten years ago.

Clearly then, women emerge from the consultation as the victims of a plethora of social evils. In contrast to this theme, however, a smaller group of participants identified feminism as a social evil, blaming it for undermining the role of men in the family and society, contributing to the breakdown of the

family and fuelling the demise of family values by, for example, encouraging mothers into the workplace. One participant thought that when “taken to extremes [feminism] is breaking up the family values that have served us well for generations” and several participants felt that the family courts unfairly discriminated against fathers. One person perceived “real and sometimes blatant favouritism of women over men” and another said that “men are meant to be partners in this society but they are now portrayed as evil”. This participant blamed feminism for promoting negative stereotypes of men and making it acceptable “to call all men rapists and paedophiles”.

Religion

There was disagreement among participants around the issue of religion. Some identified the decline of religion in society as a social evil. For some people what they see as the godlessness of contemporary society is inherently bad. Other participants saw the decline of religion as instrumentally bad, blaming it for the decline of values discussed earlier in this paper. As one person put it, there is a “lack of God and absolutes to live by ... There is no one to be accountable to and ultimately how you feel determines your actions.” Another person agreed that the decline of religion has led to “individualism, self-centredness, loss of value and respect for human life”.

A more dominant opinion, however, stood in stark contrast to this: some people identified religion itself as a social evil. This group generally focused on one of three issues: the “erosion of secularism”; religion as cause of intolerance and conflict; and religion as a source of irrationality.

Religion and politics: “the erosion of secularism”

Some participants focused on the role of religion in politics arguing that “we should not be making any political or educational decisions based on religion”. One person criticised the

fact that there are faith representatives in the House of Lords, but a more common complaint surrounded the influence of religion in education. For example, citing religion as a social evil, one participant went on to say that “children should be taught to derive their conclusions from evidence and logic, not the ravings of deluded idiots”. Another criticised the fact that “religious doctrinaires [are] increasing their grip on the UK education system with government support”. One participant argued that “the state should become disestablished from the Church of England and there should be an end to state funding of faith schools”. Other participants warned that faith schools “foster a lack of tolerance towards other faiths and lifestyles”.

Religion and social cohesion: “the most divisive agent in our society”

Some people saw religion as a social evil because it “undermines social cohesion” and is “a force for separating people”. Participants also felt that religion can actively encourage intolerance, towards some groups in particular: “Faith in supernatural phenomena inspires hatred and prejudice throughout the world, and is commonly used as justification for continued persecution of women, gays and people who do not have faith”. So in stark contrast to those who see the decline of religion as complicit in a decline of values, some participants blamed religion itself for undermining certain values. Another participant highlighted the deficiencies of religion as the basis of a value system for a different reason:

There are too many of them [religions], and none make any sense. We need to develop a consensus around rules for a decent, open and honest society, perhaps based on a refined Human Rights Act.

Religion and knowledge: “ridiculous hypotheses as unquestionable truth”

Other participants identified religions as social evils because they “promote strong beliefs for which there is no objective evidence [and] undermine rational behaviour”. Another person

explained that religion “should no longer be a consideration in the 21st century as we get more scientific in our outlook. But it appears to be going through a resurgence in popularity and this brings intolerance and anti-intellectualism.” One participant cited the example of religions “blocking the distribution of condoms in countries with high rates of HIV” as an example of the harm religious doctrine can cause. Several participants felt that the irrationality of religion is so clear that our tolerance of it is unjustified: “The idea that a person can believe a proposition to be true in spite of no supporting evidence, and even in spite of evidence to the contrary, is something that should not be automatically granted respect, but treated with contempt”.

A third group of participants were not concerned with the role of the religion in society generally, but only with “religious extremism”. For example, one explained:

Religion itself is not a social evil. Quite the opposite. Real religion (such as true Christianity or true Islam) should be about worship, faith and following a set of ideals that promote a harmonious and just way of living, not a vehicle for those who want to fuel or incite suspicion, intolerance, hate and violence.

As in this response, religious extremism was often linked to violence and also seen as a driving force behind terrorism.

Social diversity, immigration and intolerance

Many of the responses concerned issues to do with social diversity, primarily multiculturalism and immigration. People’s perspectives on these issues varied greatly: some focused on the negative impacts of immigration or increasing multiculturalism on British society.

⁶ These participants rarely distinguished between different groups of ‘newcomers’, such as asylum seekers and refugees, economic migrants and illegal immigrants.

Others felt that it is public or governmental attitudes to immigrants and other “outsiders” that is the social evil.

Immigration: “it will create a divided society”

Some participants felt that current flows of immigration are “unrestricted”, “unchecked” or “out of control”.⁶ Participants suggested a variety of explanations for why this is a social evil: one explained that “there is so much diversity, that we do not have common values any more”. Another person felt that “our culture is what binds us together as a people” and that multiculturalism can “cause friction and loss of common goals”. Other responses focused on the potential for immigration to cause “unrest and ill-feeling between communities”. Others were concerned that “it will create a divided society and breeds contempt and jealousy between groups” and another agreed that “indigenous inhabitants are becoming increasingly resentful and intolerant”.

One key reason that immigration was identified as causing resentment between groups was the perceived unfairness associated with the allocation of resources to immigrants. One person complained for example that “British taxpayers’ money is given to anyone who wants to come and live here. It should be given back to the people who paid it in.” In addition to the perceived unfairness of redistributing money from non-immigrant to immigrant groups, some respondents felt that these “hundreds of thousands of newcomers ... do not put into the system”. One person commented that they “have no problem with those with genuine problems entering the country as long as they are working and making a contribution”, but the responses suggest that some people don’t think this is the case:

[There are] too many immigrants into the country who are unwilling to work/learn the language.

The country continues to let people in who cannot find a job and survive on state benefits,

paid by the taxpayers to people that have never contributed anything to the country.

These issues were felt to be all the more acute by some participants who thought that immigration was putting “stress on our public services [which are] already stretched to the limit”. Another person agreed that immigration is “causing overpopulation and all that goes with it, i.e. pressure on housing and the countryside, traffic congestion, strain on health services, schools, police etc.”. Some participants voiced compassion for immigrants, but nevertheless felt that we “need to sort out ourselves before we let others in!”

Whilst most caring people feel sorry for immigrants fleeing from persecution in their own countries, we are a small island with limited resources and can't be held responsible for saving the world.

So, immigration itself was identified as a social evil, as was the mismanagement of immigration, and in particular the failure to integrate communities in a multicultural society. One person felt, for example, that “there is a lack of policy geared to effect integration”. Another observed that “the pace of change has been too fast for all cultures to be properly absorbed and integrated for the good of us all” and another identified a “lack of appropriate community spaces in which people of different cultural backgrounds can meet and learn from each other”.

Attitudes to immigration: “rather than welcoming the diversity this brings to the UK we are increasingly hostile”

Other participants identified people's attitudes towards immigration and immigrants as a social evil. People felt that there is a “lack of compassion” or “goodwill towards immigrants coming here to earn a living and contribute to society” and another criticised the “failure of public bodies to raise the issue of empathy to the foreground of the social cohesion debate”. Several participants implored the public to overcome these fears and embrace a more positive attitude to immigration, emphasising the diversity and economic

advantages that immigration can bring. One participant said for example:

I wish people had a more rounded view of immigration, based on facts, and could see it as being part of the UK's rich tapestry rather than focusing on the scaremongering coverage of a minority's bad behaviour.

Some people clearly felt that the media and government have an important role to play here and criticised “the way immigration, and immigrants, are seen and treated as evil by the media and government (with the undercurrent of racism that goes with it) rather than a welcome, necessary and positive aspect of our society”. Asylum seekers and refugees were often perceived to be particularly vulnerable to negative attitudes. For example one participant identified as a social evil “the way we treat asylum seekers and refugees who are seeking sanctuary in our country. It is appalling that many vulnerable people are forced into destitution when their claims fail and that so many, including children, are held in detention.”

Intolerance and lack of trust: “lack of understanding, tolerance, respect and trust of ... people from different backgrounds”

The consultation suggests that we are not only fearful and intolerant of immigrants, but of anyone who is different. For example, one participant identified a “lack of understanding of, and willingness to understand, people who are different from you”. Another focused on how our intolerance of difference promotes conformism and identified an “erosion of the right to be different – whether our conformity to lifestyles and opinions defined by advertising and the media, or the intolerance faced by ‘outsiders’”. The types of difference participants felt are not tolerated include those around sexuality, ethnicity, religion, race, disability, weight, age, region, lifestyle and gender.

People did not only feel that we fail to tolerate people who are different, but that we are fearful and suspicious of them:

Fear of 'other' – fear and lack of understanding leading to dislike/hatred of people who are of different race, religion, lifestyle, age, from different areas of a city/country/world etc. – putting people who are different down seems to be a particularly British thing.

I think safe communities can only exist when everyone believes that other people are not so different from themselves.

**Discrimination and prejudice:
“discrimination in all shapes and forms ...
affects you for a whole range of reasons”**

It was not only people's attitudes and perceptions towards “anyone who is different” that were identified as social evils but also people's behaviour towards certain groups. Discrimination and prejudice clearly emerged as social evils and several groups were identified as victims of these evils, in particular women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and Muslims ('Islamophobia' was cited by several people as a social evil). Racism and racial discrimination were a particularly dominant concern under this heading: several participants focused on “endemic” or “institutionalised” racism and felt that while “overt racism is generally not tolerated, I think the more ‘covert’ forms of racism are widespread”.

Health and care

A number of different issues to do with health emerged in the consultation. One theme focused on “health problems caused by lifestyle factors”. People connected ill-health and obesity to poor diets, junk food, and fast food and often stressed the need to “educate people to understand how to live healthy lives”. Another person added: “I think obesity is a huge part of today's society and it's not only schools that need to educate the children, but the parents need educating too!”

Other participants focused on the deficiencies of health care. For example, some pointed to low standards of hygiene and patient care in the

National Health Service; a lack of support for particular groups (people with mental health problems, disabled people, drug users and victims of rape or trauma) and a lack of particular services (National Health Service dentists and maternity services).

By far the most frequently discussed health related social evil concerned the provision of care for elderly people. There were some concerns about the availability and quality of such care, with some people criticising the lack of compassion shown towards older people in care. The majority of concerns, however, focused on the cost and funding of care for older people. Here is a typical response: “Elderly people having saved hard all their life, being forced to sell their property for care fees and also their hard-earned life savings. Absolutely deplorable.”

Other participants focused on the lack of support and recognition for informal carers: “The way UK carers are kept in poverty through no fault of their own, we carers save the government £87bn a year and get under £50 per week for a reward”. Concern was also expressed for paid carers who some participants felt were “underpaid, overworked and undervalued”. As several of the responses cited in the section illustrate, responsibility for this social evil was firmly placed at the government's door: it was criticised for the “privatisation”, “mismanagement” and “lack of funding” of the National Health Service.

Environmental issues

Environmental concerns were also identified as “some of the great social challenges of our era”. Some participants were unsure about identifying environmental problems as social evils, but felt that this was justified both because “we cause them” and because of the impact these environmental issues will have on society both now and in the future. Several people saw environmental degradation as an example of our “lack of consideration for future generations”:

“We use and consume at will and give no thought to future generations”.

People focused on several more specific environmental issues, including the wastefulness of consumer culture and the “ecological excesses created by large companies”. Other people focused on how we treat animals and intensive farming, animal testing and the meat and dairy industry and several participants focused on the “disconnect between society and environment” and our “alienation” from nature.

The biggest theme relating to the environment, however, was climate change: “We face unprecedented levels of human displacement, an enormous and irreversible loss of biodiversity and environmental consequences that we simply can’t predict”. The consultation also reveals a strong feeling that effective action is not being taken to remedy this evil: “Society is unprepared and unwilling to rationalise and confront [climate change]”. Some people focused on the failure of political leaders to take action. For example, one person criticised a “reluctance of the governments of rich countries to lead by example and take a radical stance on climate change”. Others focused on the failure of individuals to “fully face individual responsibility for climate change through day-to-day behaviour”. Another person explained more fully:

Despite all this talk about ‘green issues’ an awful lot of people still create ridiculously large unnecessary amounts of waste (especially rubbish and carbon dioxide) [they] drive their car to the corner shop, buy take-away drinks and food in plastic containers, take a plastic bag when buying just one item in the shop, leave the water running when they brush their teeth, put the dishwasher on when it’s a quarter full etc., etc. I’m really encouraged by the way that a few small places in the UK have made a concerted and joint effort to abolish plastic bags or save energy and this spirit should be replicated much more widely: we’re in this together!

Some alternative ‘evils’

Here are some examples of the more unusual responses we received to the question ‘what are today’s social evils?’

Lack of the true British humour, from hoodies to the richest. We used to laugh at ourselves.

Roll mops. Because they are pointless, horrible-looking and expensive. I don’t understand, therefore it annoys me and several others I know.

The spelling system.

Barbecue chicken ... Satay sticks ... Terry Wogan.

The Joker – Batman’s arch-nemesis.

Witches (especially the one that tried to eat Hansel and Gretel!).

This consultation has sought to explore what social evils face contemporary Britain. The volume and richness of the thousands of responses received has been striking. Of course, wider conclusions cannot be drawn from the opinions of what are clearly an unrepresentative group of people. Nevertheless, 3,500 people with diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions took part with immense enthusiasm. One indisputable conclusion is that people have identified with the concept of social evil and have been eager to reflect upon the state of British society.

Cutting across the responses is an overarching sense of unease about the rapid social changes people perceive around them. Views about today's social evils come not only from people's experiences of Britain today: they are located in their perceptions of the past and expectations of the future. At the same time as recognising that these changes have brought "a mixture of good and bad effects", people are unhappy about the direction in which many of these trends have taken us. They worry about the decline of things they value – morality, community, social responsibility – and the growth of things that they feel are damaging: individualism, consumerism and greed, inequality, the misuse of drugs and alcohol.

This unease about the past translates into fear about the future. The consultation suggests that people feel hostage to these trends rather than part of them. While some pointed to the government, the media, big business or religion as responsible for social evils, the complexity and scale of many of them belie placing the blame only on these institutions, or on individuals themselves. Participants recognised that some of these evils seem to be cultural and

entrenched in people's ways of living and thinking: people seem "to be locked into this individualistic, consumerist, fearful, uncaring mode of living ... We don't like what we have become and yet we seem to lack the agency to do anything about it."

That so many of these evils seem to be culturally embedded and intertwined in complicated ways has left a feeling that "our future is preordained". People are unsure how to behave to create "as bright a future as possible". The irony is that these expressions of a sense of powerlessness took place within a consultation revealing an amazingly strong commitment to identifying and discussing these problems.

Many of the evils identified by Joseph Rowntree in 1904 remain a concern today, including poverty, drugs, alcohol and gambling, but despite these overlaps the consultation leaves a sense that there is now a different kind of concern about the direction in which society is heading. Are we less optimistic today than Joseph Rowntree and his contemporaries were that the social evils can be overcome? The consultation reveals some key obstacles to resolving these social evils that were perhaps less problematic in 1904.

Firstly, in contemporary society people are constantly confronted with social problems through a range of channels that convey the complexity and magnitude of these issues. Individuals are left to reconcile the tension between this information and the apparent insignificance of their day-to-day lives and minute-by-minute actions: "a big change [is] needed to make sure people think about the small things they do".

A second obstacle concerns thinking about the kind of society that we wish to live in. People's worries about consumerism and greed, individualism and community, inequality and poverty, a lack of values, drugs and alcohol, families and young people and institutions such as government and the media imply a vision of what a 'good society' might look like: a more equal society in which communities are stronger, in which there is a shared set of values, in which families are strong and young people are involved and well-educated. Finally, it would be a society where the government has got to grips with the old evils and in which the media is careful not to fuel or create new ones. Finding ways to create this society is the challenge the consultation leaves us with.

However, it is easy to glide over the genuine differences between people's views about what today's social evils are. For example, is religion a social evil or is it a force for good whose decline is causing damage to society? Is immigration a social evil or is it merely something we are fearful of and need to embrace and adapt to? Are young people to blame for some of society's social evils or are they victims of prejudice and disadvantage? Are women disadvantaged or has their changing role undermined the family and caused damage throughout society? Where there are such disagreements and there is no clear vision about what people want the future to look like, it is not clear how these issues might be tackled.

So the consultation leaves us with two questions: firstly, can we reach a broader consensus on what today's social evils are? And secondly, how can we – as individuals, families, communities, institutions and governments – move towards a better society and away from these evils? Reflecting these questions, the second phase of the social evils programme will take a more detailed look at some of these issues and seek a range of perspectives on what the possible solutions to today's social evils might be.

Appendix: Analysing the website responses

People who participated in the online consultation were able to give three social evils, starting with the worst and moving on to others. Similar topics and themes emerged from people's first, second and third responses. Moreover, people's second and third evils were usually discussed with as much fervour as their first. This report has therefore considered participants' first, second and third responses together.

Responses varied greatly in length, complexity and the issues they covered: some people offered a single word, others several pages detailing the causes of the social evil they chose and its impact on society. A process of coding was used to label the responses according to the issues it raised and nearly 90 codes emerged from this process. Up to three of these codes were assigned to each response in order to capture the complexity of some of the submissions. These codes were grouped into the twelve themes (listed earlier) which form the structure of this report.

As noted in the introduction, the interconnectedness of the themes and the complexity of many of the responses make it hard to quantify how many people identified 'X' as a social evil. This has been a qualitative and not quantitative investigation. Ranking them in order of popularity has therefore not been possible. However, some of the themes were clearly more dominant than others and the order in which the themes have been discussed broadly reflects this. Themes 1 to 6 stood out as particularly dominant areas of concern.

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