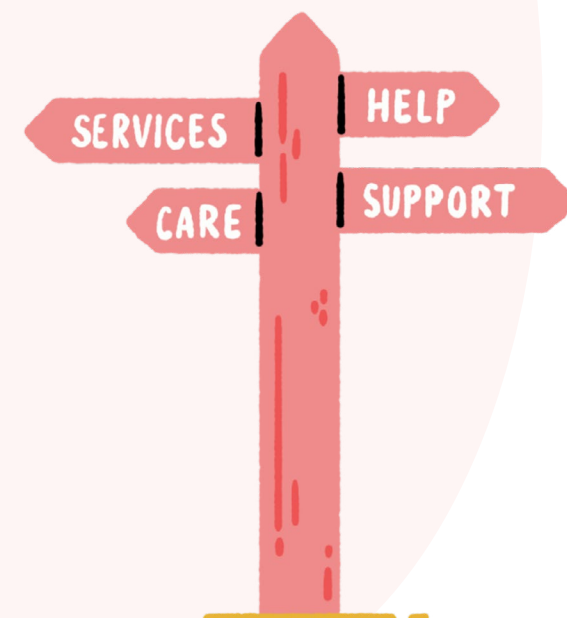


# GROWING UP IN DUDLEY

**A Qualitative Exploration of  
Underrepresented Communities'  
Needs and Experiences**

# Contents

<b>Contents</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Foreword from Dudley Council</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>About the Project</b>	<b>7</b>
How to cite this report	8
Acknowledgements	9
<b>Summary</b>	<b>10</b>
Introduction	11
Key findings	11
Priorities for action	15
Conclusion	18
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>19</b>
Aims and approach	21
How we worked	22
<b>Parents' and Carers' Stories</b>	<b>24</b>
The impact of Covid-19	25
Starting a family: the first 1001 days	25
Not feeling heard	25
Needing the same support for every baby	26
Feeling overwhelmed and alone	26
Postnatal mental health	28
The importance of continuity of care and building relationships	29
Dads feel side-lined	30
Finding activities, information and advice	32



<b>Bringing up children and young people in Dudley</b>	<b>33</b>
Dudley is great for younger children but lacks facilities for teenagers	33
Barriers to activities	33
Perceptions of a lack of safety	34
Children and young people's mental health	34
<b>Families of children who have special educational needs and disabilities</b>	<b>35</b>
Fighting for diagnoses	35
Practical information is often missing after diagnosis	35
Relying on peers and charities to join the dots between services	37
Access to appropriate facilities and activities	37
The impact on parents and siblings	38
The importance of community and peer support	38
<b>How the Covid-19 pandemic affected families</b>	<b>39</b>
Impact in the first 1001 days	39
Impact on children's development and school readiness	39
How the pandemic affected teenagers	40
Meeting the needs of Dudley's parents, carers and families	40
Feeling seen and heard	40
Inclusive mental health	41
Dads in the picture	41
Building supportive communities through peer support	41
Addressing affordability and accessibility	43
Accessible and reliable information	43
Extra support for young parents	43
More investment in outdoor play	44
Better support for families with special educational needs and disabilities	44

<b>Children's and Young People's Stories</b>	<b>46</b>
How young people spend their time	47
Leisure facilities and social activities	48
Feeling unsafe	48
Antisocial behaviour and crime	48
Problem areas	49
Experiences of harassment and discrimination	49
Young people's wellbeing	51
Pressures on young people	51
Bullying	52
Getting help and support	52
Mental health support	54
Thinking about the future	54
Concerns about climate change and loss of green spaces	54
Is there a future for young people in Dudley?	55
What's missing from local provision for young people	55
Spaces, places and facilities young people value	55
Safe spaces for socialising with friends	57
Affordable ways to keep physically and mentally fit	57
Spaces to escape the pressures and have fun	58
A wider range of activities	60
Spaces and activities for older teens	60
Accessible and inclusive spaces	61
Tackling racism, gender discrimination, transphobia and ableism	63
Easier access to sexual and mental health services	63
Support to cope with change and help with 'adulthood'	64
Affordable activities and transport	66
Easy to find information about what's available for young people	67
<b>Conclusions and Priorities for Action</b>	<b>68</b>

# **Foreword from Dudley Council**

As a council we are committed to working with local organisations, partners, professionals and an array of communities to help make Dudley a place where everyone can live longer, safer, healthier lives. How we plan to do this is set out in our Health & Wellbeing Strategy, which highlights the goals we have agreed to improve the lives of people living and working in Dudley. A large part of this is to ask and hear the voices of local people to help us improve and deliver services that are effective, fit for purpose and accessible for local communities, families and young people across Dudley.

To do this in an informed way, in December 2022, we commissioned Frame, who are an innovative, creative, and passionate company, to connect and engage with the children, young people, parents/ carers, and service providers to truly discover what it is like to live and grow up in Dudley today. Our aim was to go further than previous traditional consultation methods, really getting to the heart of the child and family's journey and being able to report back on this journey using modern and accessible technology.

We are delighted to now share the findings of this work in this report. Whilst this report gives us valuable insight into Dudley's families' and children's feelings, this is not the end of our journey as we want to continue the conversation of improvement. The findings here are a starting point for the next chapter to further develop and shape services to support the wellbeing needs of the populations we serve.

**Dr Mayada Abuaffan**  
**Director of Public Health and Wellbeing**

## Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by Dudley Council Public Health and Wellbeing Directorate. The purpose was to gather lived experience of children, young people, new parents and families on what it is like to live and grow up in Dudley. The report provides a 'narrow and deep' qualitative insight, rather than a 'wide and shallow' quantitative or representative view of the whole borough.

The research was undertaken and written by Frame, who worked with partners across Dudley. We would like to thank them for their energy, passion and creativity that they brought to this work.

We would like to thank the Dudley Health & Care Partnership for their financial contributions to this work, which without them, would not have been possible.

Finally, we would like to give special thanks to all those who gave their time, commitment, and honesty to take part in this research, including fellow professionals, community groups, families, and young people of Dudley.



# About the Project

Growing Up in Dudley was commissioned by Dudley Council and delivered by Frame and yello brick. **Frame** is a social research organisation using creative, inclusive, and participatory methods to address health and social inequalities. **yello brick** is a creative production studio using games, storytelling and playful experiences to create connections, generate insights and build community. Find us at [framecollective.org.uk](https://framecollective.org.uk) and [yellobrick.co.uk](https://yellobrick.co.uk).

The project was designed, delivered and put into words and pictures by Rosa Robinson, Alison John and Matt Joyce:

**Rosa Robinson** is a social researcher and evaluator specialising in creative, inclusive, participatory and people-centred approaches, often with 'less heard from' communities. Her work across the UK focuses on reducing health and social inequalities, improving outcomes and influencing policy and practice. Rosa is Frame's founding director and a Social Research Association member.

**Alison John** is a creative producer who works across multiple disciplines from theatre to virtual reality, making work that places the audience at the heart of the experience. She works with organisations and communities to discover their stories through interactive workshops that utilise social design, play, game, digital, theatrical and art-based forms.

**Matt Joyce** is an illustrator who specialises in murals and animations that bring people's stories to life. A long-time collaborator with Frame and yellobrick, Matt regularly translates complex ideas into clear and visual stories that capture significant moments and key findings in relatable and memorable ways.

## How to cite this report

Rosa Robinson, Alison John, Matt Joyce (2023), 'Growing Up in Dudley: Hearing what children, young people and their families need to thrive' (for Dudley Council), available from [framecollective.org.uk/growing-up-in-dudley](https://framecollective.org.uk/growing-up-in-dudley)



**Frame.**



**MATT  
JOYCE**



[Jump to contents](#)

## Acknowledgements

We want to thank everyone who shared their experiences and helped us understand what growing up in Dudley is like. The stories we collected will be essential in shaping the future of services and support for families, children and young people across the Borough.

We also want to acknowledge the brilliant statutory and community organisations who supported our work by facilitating conversations and helping us ensure that people with diverse backgrounds and experiences could be part of the conversation. Enormous thanks to Brierley Hill Babybank, Beacon Hill School, Boom Box, Brierley Hill Brownies, Brierley Hill Scouts, Churches Housing Association of Dudley and District (CHADD), Christ Church in Lye, CreArt, Crossroads Carers, Destined to Reign, Dudley

Council for Voluntary Services (DCVS), Dudley Borough Libraries, Ekho Collective, Here4Youth, Home-Start, Family Nurse Partnership (FNP), Maternity Voices Partnership, New Baby Network CIC, Pegasus Academy, Revival Fires, Real Mama Tribe, Rosewood School, Neonatal Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT) Team, Top Church, We Love Carers, What Centre, Wheels, Wrens Nest Stay & Play, YMCA, and each of the Family Hubs across the Dudley Borough.

We would also like to thank our colleagues at Dudley Council, who helped us connect with services and departments to ensure we reached as many people in the community as possible to hear and document their lived experiences and views.



# Summary

## Introduction

Growing up in Dudley is based on conversations that took place in 2023 with 60 parents and carers and 163 young people living in the Dudley Borough. The project brief was to offer deep insights into the lived experiences of people living in Dudley, with an emphasis on people who have greater challenges and are less heard. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure coverage across these groups to reach these 'less heard from' populations through trusted community partner organisations.

The findings of this qualitative needs assessment provide rich insights into the experiences of parents, children and young people in Dudley, especially in the context of a post-Covid-19 pandemic and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis. The report highlights what is working well, what is lacking and what is needed to improve wellbeing, and is a valuable resource for policymakers, service providers and community organisations to improve services and support the wellbeing of children, young people and their families.

## Key findings



### **Loneliness, isolation and challenges accessing support**

New parents and parents with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) often struggle to access services and support and feel "passed from pillar to post." Dads' support needs are often overlooked and there are limited options for them to meet and interact with other dads. Young people often feel stuck at home in their bedrooms because there's nowhere to go. They often don't know where to find help and say the support that schools offer varies widely. Young people are embarrassed about asking for help or advice about their mental and sexual health.

## Hard to find information

Knowing where to go for information and advice can be difficult and frustrating. Often, people rely on family, friends and social media. Moms<sup>1</sup> often turn to Facebook groups and Mumsnet for parenting advice and information about local groups and activities. They say website content is often out of date and unreliable. Parents of children with SEND mainly rely on carer peers and charities. Young people rely on their schools and their parents for information, but success is mixed. Teenagers often feel there's an information gap post-school. They say that a lot of relevant and interesting information is under-advertised, such as the PRIDE event and the disabled bus pass scheme for young people.



## Not feeling heard

Parents, carers and young people often feel their feelings and opinions are overlooked by services and support systems. Young first-time parents often feel patronised, judged and belittled. Parents with children with SEND say they have "to fight" for a diagnosis and practical support. Young people feel that their schools often don't understand their needs, especially around mental health issues and bullying, and that Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) offer treatments but don't listen. Young people with SEND often feel excluded and want more opportunities for their voices to influence decisions about their lives, future and communities.



<sup>1</sup> Throughout the report we use 'moms' rather than mothers or mums, as this is how the majority of people we spoke to described themselves and others.



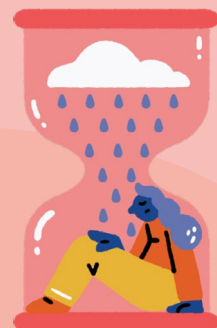
### **A lack of inclusive, engaging and affordable activities**

Dudley has great options for entertaining younger children but lacks safe outdoor play spaces, inclusive social spaces and engaging activities, particularly for older children and teenagers. Parents with children with SEND say local activities don't cater to their children's needs, and are at unsuitable times. Low-income families and single parents with several children struggle to afford leisure and recreational activities like swimming or sports. Young people say there's nowhere to go and nothing to do. They hang out with friends at fast-food restaurants but say it's unhealthy and expensive. They are frustrated that gym equipment in parks is often out of use and nets on sports pitches and courts are broken or covered in glass. Older young people say there's nothing age-appropriate they can afford to do.

### **Safety concerns in public spaces**

Safety in public areas was a prominent issue, affecting the wellbeing and freedom of children and young people in Dudley. Parents worry about their children's safety now and in the future. Young people avoid local places and spaces they'd like to use and adapt their behaviours to avoid danger. Young women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, or asexual (LGBTQ+) young people feel unsafe and regularly experience harassment in their daily lives. Parents and young people alike notice a lack of police presence and poor lighting in Dudley's towns, which attracts antisocial behaviour and crime.





## Mental health needs

Mental health support is identified as a critical need across all age groups. New moms feel there is little support available, especially if their support needs are lower level and they mostly need a helping hand to manage parenting anxieties, build their self-esteem and confidence. New dads often struggle with poor mental health but say there is no option to get help. Care leavers and trauma-experienced<sup>2</sup> parents have additional barriers to seeking help and need additional support. Parents with children with SEND are constantly exhausted and often have poor mental health but do not feel able to prioritise their own needs in their struggle to manage day-to-day life. Children and young people struggle at points of transition in their lives and feel under pressure throughout their teenage years. Their mental health needs are diverse, but they feel there is little support available that practically understands their psychological and emotional needs. When unsure where to turn, young people often internalise – with some saying they self-soothe with drugs and alcohol.

## Community voice and representation

The report identifies a gap in services that do not fully reflect the voices and experiences of children, young people and parents, especially from marginalised or vulnerable groups. The people who took part in Growing Up in Dudley said the opportunity to share their experiences was rare and yet valuable. They want more opportunities to have their say and influence services and systems that affect their lives.



<sup>2</sup> Trauma is a lasting emotional response that results from experiencing or witnessing a distressing event that is out of our control during childhood or adulthood. For example, violence, assault, the death of a close friend or family member or racism and other types of hatred.

## Priorities for action

The report highlights what parents, carers, children and young people think is missing and needed in Dudley and outlines the priority actions for addressing the key findings:

### Making information and support more accessible

Develop more accessible services and support for parents, especially including dads and families with SEND children. Parents want more opportunities to meet peers in similar circumstances and to create support networks. They want earlier support with a SEND diagnosis and referral and clear referral pathways to joined-up services. All young people want support that meets their needs without stigma or shame, and to feel heard.

### Offering more inclusive mental health support

Make mental health services more accessible to parents and young people by creating better access to information and more tailored support. For example, creating a support offer for new dads or a tailored approach with trauma-experienced new parents to reduce barriers to support. Understand more about the gaps in mental health provision for young people, at schools and within the community, and why young people feel there are "helpers, not healers" – services that offer support but don't meet young people's needs.



## Supporting SEND families

Families with SEND children need more streamlined support and clearer communication between various services. They need easier access to information and more support around seeking a diagnosis and getting practical support. Parents of SEND children need better mental health support. They also want more visibility and say in the design of services that affect their families.



## Develop inclusive, affordable spaces and activities

Create more inclusive and engaging social spaces and activities for children and teenagers, including families with children with SEND, who are often simultaneously caring for children with additional needs and their siblings. Parents want to get their children off screens and into fresh air. They want more investment in grassroots sports and outdoor play. Young people want safe spaces to socialise and escape the pressure of school without judgement. Some, especially those with siblings with SEND or chaotic family lives, want a safe space to escape home for a while.

## Focus on community safety

Address safety concerns in parks, town centres, and other public areas to improve the living conditions for young residents. Start community conversations with parents, young people and diverse stakeholders, including service providers, charities, community groups, youth workers, and the police, about what's needed and possible across the Borough.

## Provide easily accessible information

Families want a central hub for reliable, up-to-date information on available local services and activities. Parents say they miss Family Centres but families are unaware of their local Family Hubs.

## Support people to increase their physical and mental health and wellbeing

Enable people of all ages to care for their physical and mental health and wellbeing through community connection with peers and exercise. Parents want affordable exercise classes they can take their babies to (or with a crèche offer). They also want places and activities to get them out of the house, provide structure to their day and offer support through social contact and peer support. Young people often manage anxiety and low mood through sports and gym workouts and want affordable ways to exercise.



## **Deepen engagement and coproduce services and support**

Adults, children and young people want to feel heard and respected, and they want to play an active role in shaping the policies and services that affect them. Ensure that community services and policies are developed with direct input from both adults and young people. Across conversations, people of all ages and backgrounds valued the opportunity Growing Up in Dudley created for them to share their stories and feel heard. Minority groups especially feel that their views and voices are underrepresented and want more visibility.

## **Conclusion**

Growing Up in Dudley provides valuable insights for creating a more inclusive, supportive and responsive environment for children, young people and their parents in the Dudley Borough. By addressing the report's priorities for action in partnership with the community and other stakeholders, Dudley can become a leading example in nurturing and supporting its youngest residents to thrive and meet their potential, ensuring a community that values and meets their diverse needs.



# Introduction

The metropolitan borough of Dudley is in the heart of the Black Country<sup>3</sup>, on the edge of the West Midlands. Dudley comprises five townships: Dudley Central, Dudley North, Brierley Hill, Halesowen and Stourbridge. It's a mostly urban borough that is home to approximately 323,500 people<sup>4</sup> – and around 76,300 children and young people aged 0 to 19 years of age: 19% of the population is aged 0–15 years and 10% are aged 16–24<sup>5</sup>. Lone-parent families make up 12% of households<sup>6</sup>. Across the Dudley Borough, there are pockets of wealth and areas of high multiple deprivation: almost a third of people live in areas that are among the poorest 20% in England<sup>7</sup> – some areas are among the top 10% most deprived<sup>8</sup>.

Positive experiences in childhood and adolescence are vital for lifelong wellbeing, reducing inequalities and increasing socio-economic advancement. However, not everyone has the same growing-up experience. Economic, health and social inequalities, discrimination, and limited resources and opportunities can make parenting, childhood and adolescence more challenging. Dudley Council is committed to understanding and addressing these challenges

and helping all children and young people be healthy, live well and reach their full potential. To support this aim, Dudley Council commissioned social research company, Frame, and creative studio, yello brick, to start a series of inclusive community conversations about growing up in the Borough.

Growing up in Dudley is based on conversations that took place in 2023 with 60 parents and carers and 163 young people living in the Dudley Borough. The project brief was to offer deep insights into the lived experiences of people living in Dudley, with an emphasis on people who have greater challenges and are less heard. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure coverage across these groups to reach these 'less heard from' populations through trusted community partner organisations.

The findings of this qualitative needs assessment provide rich insights into the experiences of parents, children and young people in Dudley, especially in the context of a post-Covid-19 pandemic and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis. The report highlights what is working well, what is lacking and what is needed to improve wellbeing,

<sup>3</sup> The Black Country is a former industrial and mainly urban areas of the Midlands, covering most of the Dudley, Sandwell and Walsall Metropolitan Boroughs: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120117212241/http://www.blackcountrysociety.co.uk/about/>.

<sup>4</sup> Office for National (ONS) Statistics Census Data 2021: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/E08000027/>.

<sup>5</sup> Dudley Safeguarding Children Partnership Group Annual Report 2021: <https://dudleysafeguarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2020-21dscpg-annual-report.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Office for National Statistics Census Data 2021: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E08000027/>.

<sup>7</sup> Dudley Indices of Deprivation 2019: <https://www.allaboutdudley.info/news/indices-of-deprivation/>.

<sup>8</sup> Dudley Children Safeguarding Children Partnership Group: <https://dudleysafeguarding.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2020-21dscpg-annual-report.pdf>.



and is a valuable resource for policymakers, service providers and community organisations to improve services and support the wellbeing of children, young people and their families.

Growing Up in Dudley complements previous statistical needs assessments<sup>9</sup> (March 2023) by providing lived-experience evidence of need. The previous assessments offer valuable insights into the health, socio-economic conditions and educational experiences from early childhood to young adulthood. They underscore the need for targeted support and interventions across different life stages. Growing Up in Dudley adds colour to the picture, offering deeper insights into people's needs and the contexts of people's lives and providing a focus on areas with higher needs and greater long-term disadvantage.

The stories gathered from parents, caregivers, children and young people provide invaluable insights that will guide Dudley Council's commissioning priorities and strategic programmes, including Start for Life, Family Hubs, Child-Friendly Dudley, the Early Help Strategy, young people's services and programmes, and programmes dedicated to children and young people with additional learning needs and disabilities and their caregivers and families. This will help Dudley Council and its health and social care and voluntary sector partners make a positive impact on the wellbeing of its youngest

residents and their carers and families.

This report presents key findings from the conversations<sup>10</sup> with parents, carers, children and young people living in the Dudley Borough. Part One includes stories from expectant parents, moms, dads, grandparents, and carers of infants and younger children. Part Two explores the stories of children and young people, their activities, values and their need for a fulfilling life. Together, these lived stories provide a comprehensive view of life in Dudley today and the changes residents envision for the future.

## **Aims and approach**

The aim of Growing Up in Dudley was to understand the daily lives and needs of parents, caregivers, children and young people across the Dudley Borough, especially in areas with higher needs and higher deprivation. It had three main goals:

- 1. Hearing people's lived experiences from their own point of view and in their own words**
- 2. Understanding what parents, caregivers, children and young people need**
- 3. Enabling Dudley Council to identify and prioritise actions across policy, practice and commissioning to enhance health and wellbeing outcomes and address inequalities across the Borough.**

<sup>9</sup> Dudley Council's Children's Needs Assessments 2023: <https://www.allaboutdudley.info/news/childrens-needs-assessments/>.

<sup>10</sup> The conversations comprised 30 group interviews (with 202 people) and 21 one-to-one interviews, talking with 223 people in total.



The timing of this project is significant. It commenced just over a year after the conclusion of the Covid-19 pandemic, a period during which many parents could reflect on their experiences and share their stories. The pandemic profoundly impacted the community, affecting access to essential services and changing how people connected with healthcare providers, community professionals and peers. Its effects are felt to this day.

## How we worked

We identified ways to enable people of different ages, life stages, genders, ethnicities and abilities to join the conversation. We set up group conversations and one-to-one interviews with the help of community groups and voluntary organisations across Dudley. People were grouped based on similar ages or life stages to create shared experiences and comfortable spaces for conversations. We focused on the following groupings:

- **Parents and carers of infants in the First 1001 days<sup>11</sup> and Early Years<sup>12</sup>**
- **Primary school-age children and their parents and carers**

- **Parents and carers of children with additional learning needs (ALN) or SEND**
- **Young people aged 11-16 years**
- **Older young people aged 17-19 years (or up to 25)<sup>13</sup>**

Between January and September 2023, we held 30 group conversations with 202 people and conducted 21 one-to-one interviews over the phone or video call. Before each conversation, we explained the project, emphasised that participation was voluntary and asked for people's consent to take part. We adopted a story-led approach,<sup>14</sup> using creative techniques such as drawing and storytelling to help participants share their experiences. We took detailed notes of each conversation, later analysing them using Miro<sup>15</sup> and NVivo<sup>16</sup> and grouping the data into themes and subthemes. We used direct quotes to illustrate our findings while giving people fictional names to protect their identities. A more detailed explanation of our research methods is available as an annex to this document.

<sup>11</sup> The first 1001 days of a child's life are from conception to their second birthday and are crucial for long-term health and development: <https://www.dudleyhealthandwellbeing.org.uk/1001days>.

<sup>12</sup> Early years covers the ages of 0-5 years.

<sup>13</sup> Young people up to the age of 19 or 25 if they had special educational needs or disabilities.

<sup>14</sup> Story-led approaches using semi-structured topic guides enable findings to be influenced by research objectives while creating space for emerging concepts and providing rich, in-depth descriptions of people's lived experiences.

<sup>15</sup> Miro is an online whiteboard platform used to visually sort data for thematic analysis.

<sup>16</sup> NVivo is qualitative data analysis software for in-depth data analysis.



# **Parents' and Carers' Stories**

This section explores the personal narratives of parents and carers in Dudley, offering insight into the daily realities of raising a family in the Borough. It provides an intimate look at the joys, challenges and aspirations of those responsible for nurturing the next generation. From the early days of parenting to the nuanced needs of families with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), these stories highlight the critical areas where families feel support is lacking and where the Dudley Borough can grow stronger.

## **The impact of Covid-19**

Before we tell parents' stories, it's important to provide some background. Our conversations with parents began a little over a year following the final lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. For many parents, this was the first time they could reflect on what they had experienced and talk about it. The pandemic affected people deeply. It made it harder for them to access the help and services they needed and changed how they connected with health workers, community professionals and friends.

Parents whose parenting journeys had begun during the pandemic often felt alone and unsure who to ask for advice. Many moms had to give birth without their partners and felt alone and scared. Being at home with their babies without the regular face-to-face support they had expected often made them more anxious

and less confident about their parenting skills. Parents of toddlers and preschoolers sometimes described how the pandemic caused their children developmental delays around socialisation, speech and language, which made them concerned about their readiness to transition to nursery or school. Parents of older children talked about the mental health impacts of limited socialising and home-schooling and the wider impact on family wellbeing.

It's also important to bear in mind that these parenting stories aren't just about the pandemic. They include the highs and lows that parents faced before, during and after Covid-19. They offer a broader look at the experiences of being pregnant, having babies and raising children, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of families in various circumstances.

## **Starting a family: the first 1001 days**

### **Not feeling heard**

People's experiences of pregnancy and giving birth varied greatly, from largely positive to mixed and poor experiences. Several parents, particularly young first-time moms, felt their concerns and preferences weren't taken seriously during their labour and after birth. This left them feeling alone, worried and unsupported during their stay in hospital.



New mum Louisa, 17, expresses her frustration: "I felt treated like a child. I was induced, although I didn't want to be. I wasn't listened to." Similarly, single mom, Asha, 19, felt belittled and ignored: "My pregnancy and birth were very traumatic. I was told I wasn't in labour, but I knew I was. I was told I was just being dramatic."

Young moms say they often felt patronised and judged by medical staff and perceived differential treatment compared to older parents in the maternity ward. Louisa, 17, and her partner Jon, 19, recalled that while other parents were treated like adults, they felt side-lined. Louisa says: "Other dads – older dads – were offered food at the hospital, but Jon wasn't. We'd been there just as long as them. We felt discriminated against... just because we're young, we don't matter as much."

### **Needing the same support for every baby**

First-time moms frequently felt unsupported and uncertain about how to care for and feed their babies initially. They felt they had received inadequate advice on maternity wards from their midwives or nursing staff. Mum of two, Carla, 32, ended up going online to seek pregnancy advice, saying: "There was little support and guidance available throughout my second pregnancy. I had to go on the internet and find The Honest Midwife website." For first-time mom Blaire, 26, it was immediately after giving birth that she

felt unsupported, with nobody to guide her with breastfeeding. She says: "There needs to be more support for breastfeeding. They didn't give you enough support in the hospital. For a first-time mom, it can do a lot of damage."

Second and third-time parents say that there was an assumption they already knew how to care for a baby, but they often felt overwhelmed and unsure about where to get support during pregnancy and after giving birth. Peta, 34, who has older children, says she felt out of her depth when her newborn arrived: "The assumption is that if you have a baby already, you know what you're doing. But there is quite a gap between my children, and you just forget what to do. You need the same support for every baby you have." Similarly, 33-year-old Jo says she was not only expected to know what she was doing but also to support other moms: "Because I'd had a baby already, I was left to fend for myself and help others."

### **Feeling overwhelmed and alone**

A few parents shared that their pregnancy and postnatal journey was smooth. These parents usually had the advantage of having supportive families nearby and a circle of friends and peers with kids of similar ages. This network provided a valuable source of practical help, emotional support and advice.



On the other hand, many other parents experienced a mix of highs and lows as they adapted to life with a new baby. Families with little support, young parents and single parents often found it tougher. They felt they had to manage alone, without causing any fuss and felt more judged by others and less confident in seeking assistance. Twenty-year-old Julia says she couldn't ask for help, and nobody offered any: "You just go home, and everyone expects you to be okay."

## **Postnatal mental health**

Parents talked about their experiences with postnatal depression. Some had accessed help through GPs or health visitors, which they were grateful for and found beneficial. For mom of four, Kayla, 26, classes and support services were a lifeline and made a big difference to how she felt and her ability to cope. She says: "Local perinatal classes were good. They helped with my anxiety and depression, and the mental health team has been helpful, too."

Several moms described not having the mental health and emotional support they'd hoped for. Charlie, 28, was unprepared for how she felt after bringing her baby home and felt let down when her health visitor didn't offer the support she needed: "I had no follow-up after my baby was born. The support wasn't really there from the

health visitor. I had postnatal depression and felt really lonely and wasn't sure what to do or where to find help." Single mom of two, Rose, 23, also struggled to cope and relied on her mom for guidance and support. She says: "No one teaches you anything, and there was no help for postnatal depression. I only had help from my mom."

Moms also shared that they hadn't wanted to, or felt able to, tell anyone how they'd been feeling. First-time mom, Julia, 20, said she felt desperate: "I had postnatal depression, and I felt so alone. I was drowning." For Asha, 19, hiding how she was feeling was driven by her fear that she would be judged as a bad parent. She explains: "I had depression and anxiety...I was scared to say anything because I am a care leaver, and I was scared they would take my son away, but I got through it."

Across conversations with parents, feeling overwhelmed and alone were common experiences. Parents often described feeling isolated at home with their babies without much support. Feeling this way often makes anxiety, stress or low mood even worse. Several people say they had looked for support but found nothing for their mental resilience and wellbeing, and that help only seemed to be available when mental health problems reached a crisis point.



# Leah's new chapter in Brierley Hill

Leah, in her early 20s, is learning the ropes of motherhood with her six-month-old baby in Brierley Hill. Her pregnancy, though physically healthy, was emotionally taxing due to her mother's illness. Leah's challenging birth experience and postnatal health issues created a sense of isolation, and the pandemic disrupted antenatal classes leaving her feeling disconnected. Empathetic support from her midwife and Healthy Pregnancy practitioner was a silver lining. Despite her struggles, Leah's resilience shines through as she seeks community and peer support, striving to find reassurance and companionship in motherhood.



## **The importance of continuity of care and building relationships**

Parents valued face-to-face appointments and appreciated being able to build relationships with health professionals in person, such as midwives or health visitors. When people had experienced continuity of care and had a relationship with their health professional, they reported more positive experiences.

For example, several moms had received support from the Healthy Pregnancy team to help them manage their weight, and this relationship positively affected their wellbeing. They said the support felt more personal than other services. For example, new mom Leah, 23, describes how important it was that her support worker remembered that her mom had been unwell and asked after her. She explains: "My mom was in hospital when I was pregnant, and it was bad. The Healthy Pregnancy lady was the only person who remembered to ask how I was doing and how my mom was. It made such a difference to me."

However, many parents felt passed around and overlooked. They said they had barely seen their health visitor or midwife – especially during the pandemic – or that they'd seen a different person for each appointment, which they found frustrating because building any kind of relationship was impossible. Lila, 27, says, "You

have to tell them the same thing each time, and they never get to know or understand you and what you're concerned about...and you don't know them, so you might not open up on that first visit."

While some parents reported they'd had limited contact with perinatal health teams, others found their health visitors and midwives knowledgeable and supportive. Crucially, several health professionals, including family nurses, recognised when parents needed external support and referred them to other statutory and community services. For example, 32-year-old Lisa describes how her health visitor recognised that she needed mental health support and referred her to the perinatal mental health team, where she benefited from counselling. Similarly, 22-year-old Lily's health visitor referred her to the parent support charity, Home-Start<sup>17</sup>, where she got financial support to buy food and furnish her home and personal support from a volunteer, which helped her gain confidence with taking her baby out.

For first-time parents, Louisa and Jon, 17 and 19, their family nurse recognised they needed to live independently but be supported with their newborn. She helped them secure supported social housing. Reflecting on their experience, Louisa says: "Our family nurse was incredible;



<sup>17</sup> Home Start is a charity supporting families with young children through challenging times in communities across the UK: <https://www.home-start.org.uk>.

she referred me to CHADD.<sup>18</sup> I had moved in with Mom and Dad, but it felt too much with six people living in a two-bed house. It was very stressful financially and mentally...but now we have a place where we can be a family and still get support."

## **Dads feel side-lined**

Our conversations highlighted a lack of support specifically for dads. They felt left out of conversations about their partner's pregnancy and baby's health. They sometimes felt unsupported when their baby arrived. Twenty-three-year-old new dad, Jacob, sums up what several dads told us: "It was easier in the belly than out."

Adjusting to life with a new baby was tough for others, too. Dad of two, Jay, 30, describes his experience adjusting to life as a new dad working full time: "It was exhausting, managing on so little sleep and going to work and just adjusting to life...It was my wife who'd done the hard bit...I felt like I shouldn't complain, but I was struggling. It was a lot. I wasn't much fun to be around. I couldn't communicate it, and nobody asked. I feel like I missed out on several months when we should have been enjoying time as a family."

Moms and grandparents also talked about the lack of support for dads' mental health and felt that the gap in provision for dads makes parenting more challenging for both parents. Grandmother, Eira, says, "There's nothing for dads' mental health at all. My son has really struggled, but there's nothing, and it's affected his ability to parent to the extent that he's had to move home with me [his mom] while he gets better."

Parents say that while some groups welcomed moms and dads, most felt focused on women, and there was a need to consider male partners' parenting needs to support families as a whole. New dad, Mark, 27, feels that dad-specific support networks and activities would be valuable but wonders if men would feel comfortable engaging. He says: "Speaking to other dads, like a network of dads, would be quite good, but I have no idea what the uptake would be. Generally speaking, men probably aren't as interested in sharing experiences. Likewise, dad of two, Curtis says: "I was the first dad out of my group of friends, so I had no one close to ask about parenting from a male perspective, and I was never aware of any dad-specific groups or resources or anything like that. It was stuff for the whole family but mostly just moms rather than dads."



<sup>18</sup> Churches Housing Association of Dudley and District is a charitable social housing association providing support to people who need support to live in the community: <https://www.chadd.org.uk/>.

# Sarika's new beginnings in Stourbridge

Sarika, in her mid-30s, recently moved to Stourbridge from Kent via Brierley Hill and faced the joys and challenges of new motherhood during a pandemic. Her ongoing battle with depression finds some relief through local support in Brierley Hill. Concerns for her son's development and navigating the maze of services add to her challenges. The support from Home-Start is a lifeline, offering not just practical help but also boosting her confidence and coping skills. Sarika's story is a journey of rediscovery and resilience, underscored by the value of community support in overcoming loneliness and building a new life.



## **Finding activities, information and advice**

Parents reported that it's hard to find the information they need, and they rely on their family, friends and websites for advice. They often found finding services and understanding where to go for advice and support difficult, frustrating or overwhelming.

New mum Surika, 35, says she was going around in circles trying to find the right people to speak to about her concerns about her son's development and her own mental health. She explains, "It's hard to work out who does what, and as a new mom, you don't know what you're doing...you need someone to send you in the right direction." Sara, 33, a mum of two children under the age of three, also struggles to find information about local support and activities: "The health visitors' web page hasn't been updated since last October...I have no idea what's available."

Many parents feel that information is hard to find, but they want more than just information and signposting to services. Parents feel they have been passed from service to service without getting what they need and find it exhausting and frustrating. It is important to them to be referred to services by someone with knowledge of the support available and not feel like they are on a 'wild goose chase'. Chrissy, a mum of two premature babies, summed up several parent's experiences when she described her experiences of seeking help: "You want people to refer you, not just signpost you to services that then pass you from pillar to post."

Several parents said they missed the Children's Centres but did not know anything about their local Family Hubs. Peta says: "People were so helpful at the Children's Centre. You had someone to talk to and somewhere to go, and somewhere to get your baby weighed. Now there's nowhere to go." Julie feels the same: "We used to go to the Children's Centre all the time. There was lots of support—breastfeeding, stay and play, a sensory room and trips to the zoo... but it's all shut down because of funding."

Parents like Becky, 32, rely on community groups' social media pages for information they feel they can trust to be accurate and up to date. She says: "There's nothing useful on the council website or social media...I get information from Brierley Hill Babybank's Facebook page and Real Moma Tribe. That's the best place because people share what they're learning, and you can trust it's up to date."

Similarly, when mum of two, Priah, 28, struggled to get help with her son's eating, she turned to the internet for support. She says: "There have been lots of issues with my son, and I don't feel like I'm getting the help I need. I ended up looking on Facebook and Mumsnet and posting my questions there. He hasn't been diagnosed, but from speaking to other moms, I think he could have the same condition as some of their children. When you feel like you're fighting on your own, those groups make you feel less alone."



## Bringing up children and young people in Dudley

### Dudley is great for younger children but lacks facilities for teenagers

Overall, parents, grandparents and carers think Dudley is a good place to raise children. They say that its parks and green spaces are great for getting out for a walk and entertaining younger children but feel there is less to do for primary and secondary school-aged children. Many parents want to reduce their children's screen time and stress the importance of outdoor activities, but they are frustrated that local facilities are limited. Echoing the views of several parents, 36-year-old mum of three, Heidi says: "I need more outdoor activities to get my kids off their computers."

Parents, carers and grandparents talked about how the number of local spaces for children to play outside free of charge has reduced, leaving parents with limited options for entertaining children or letting them entertain themselves affordably. Alicia, 28, a mom of two, expresses her concerns: "Some of the park equipment is badly maintained and unsafe. Kids can't play sports outside for free in some areas." Sarah, 39, agrees, adding that she thinks the lack of space is because public sports fields have been sold: "Council pitches have been sold to private companies and are not accessible in some

areas." Parents felt strongly that outdoor play should be prioritised and recognised the need for investment in facilities.

### Barriers to activities

Families think activities are too expensive for them to afford comfortably. Single parents and low-income families, especially those with multiple children, say that finding affordable activities is particularly challenging. For example, single mom of three, Sarah, says: "The cost of three tickets to anything is too expensive for us, so we need to find free activities."

Charlotte, 33, mentioned that she'd found a local space offering good and affordable activity options for her four children but was worried it might close. "It's challenging to occupy all your kids when they are different ages. Sycamore Adventure<sup>19</sup> is good for families, but it's had its funding cut. You could go and play at Sycamore and in the price you get a jacket potato too!"

Parents struggle to find activities to suit children of different ages and say Dudley lacks options for older primary-school-aged children. Mom of three, Cora, says she feels for her oldest child because there was rarely anything suitable for their whole family's needs: "Baby has to be with me, and there's usually something for my youngest, but my oldest child, who's 10, there's nothing much for him. He ends up being dragged around with me."



<sup>19</sup> Sycamore Adventure is an adventure playground in Dudley offering inclusive play sessions for children and their families: <https://www.sycamoreadventure.co.uk/>.

## **Perceptions of a lack of safety**

Parents of younger children using parks and visiting the town in the daytime have very few concerns about their children's safety, as did families living in more affluent and suburban areas. However, several parents say they are aware of problems with antisocial behaviours in other areas, which concerns them.

Christopher, dad of 12-year-old Ezra, says: "We feel reasonably happy when he is out with friends in the very local area...but there are drug and crime problems in the bigger towns and problems in the parks with youth in gangs." Several other parents also raise concerns about antisocial behaviour and crime and share their concerns about whether their children will be safe as they get older and more independent.

Christopher, whose son is still young, expresses his future concerns: "At this age, he [our son] is still a bit young to want to be independent and relies on us for lifts, and we do a lot as a family...I would have concerns about him going further afield as he gets older....there are a few problems locally with gangs and knife crime."

Another parent, Mark, has similar worries about his eight and 10-year-old daughters' future safety: "I grew up in Dudley, and I used to walk to and from school on my own. I would never even consider it for my daughters to walk on their own to and from school now. I wouldn't even feel that

confident when my daughters are 13 or 14, just walking around the corner to go to a shop. I'd be worrying. It's not something immediate, but it's in the back of my head about how things will be in the future and how safe I will feel when they go to meet friends or whatever."

Parents don't always feel safe themselves and say the lack of visible policing is an issue. Mom of two, Charlie, says she didn't always feel safe due to her family's experiences of crime: "Safety is an issue around Dudley. We've had bikes stolen, phones stolen, and there are always cars racing around." Similarly, Lisa says: "Walking through town with the kids in a pushchair, you feel a bit more safe as there are families around you. Even then, it still felt like you could cross paths with the wrong person. I appreciate that it can happen everywhere and anywhere. But I do feel that in Dudley, a general police presence isn't particularly high either."

## **Children and young people's mental health**

Parents are worried about their children's mental health, especially as children move to secondary school. They talk about how difficult it is to spot that something's wrong and to navigate sensitive conversations helpfully. Often, parents feel helpless and grateful for any support they get.

Cath explains: "Our son experienced anxiety, but as parents, we didn't realise what was wrong.



# Lily's solo journey in Halesowen

Lily, age 22, navigates motherhood mostly alone in Halesowen, with her partner working away from the area. Financial and emotional challenges are her constant companions, alongside her nine-month-old baby. Her journey is marked by an understaffed hospital and a birth experience that felt dismissive and disempowering. Yet, through Home-Start's support, she finds much-needed comfort and confidence. Her story is one of a young mother's resilience, yearning for connection and a better future for her child.



He kept it to himself and worried alone. We were referred to the What Centre<sup>20</sup> and were able to get counselling for him and all of us as a family; it's been helpful, and they gave him techniques to help manage his anxiety."

Another parent, Jane, describes feeling disappointed that her daughter's school didn't make an earlier intervention and enable her daughter to access support from Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)<sup>21</sup> sooner. She says, "School wasn't great at spotting and supporting her anxiety. We were eventually referred to CAMHS, but the waiting list was very long."

## **Families of children who have special educational needs and disabilities**

### **Fighting for diagnoses**

Parents and carers of children and young people with SEND talk about the challenges and very long wait they face getting diagnoses and treatment. Often, parents feel their concerns aren't taken seriously and say they have to fight for help and a diagnosis, feeling totally unsupported.

Priah shares her experience: "I started noticing my son wasn't meeting some of the milestones...he wasn't saying words, he wouldn't play...He's under neurodevelopment now, but at the time, it was like

they thought I was a paranoid first-time mom...I didn't know who to turn to." Similarly, Surika felt overwhelmed and lost when trying to identify where to get support. She says: "I'm worried that my child might be autistic, but I don't know where to go for advice. My GP said he's too young, and we have to wait, but I feel something is wrong. It's very lonely, not knowing who to talk to."

Until they get a diagnosis, parents often question if they've done something wrong. Nancy, 32, describes her experience and how it took reaching a crisis point to get the support she needed: "I blamed myself, and I thought it was my parenting. You tick all the boxes, and a diagnosis still doesn't get picked up. It took me breaking down on the phone to get help."

### **Practical information is often missing after diagnosis**

Initially, getting a diagnosis feels like progress, but for many parents, the lack of practical advice and support following it creates uncertainty and stress. Parents of children with SEND describe feeling that their lives have become a constant fight for appropriate help and support for their child. Emma sums up what other parents have experienced: "Paediatrics, CAMHS, and doctors are not handing out practical information. You just get a diagnosis and nothing else."

<sup>20</sup> The What? Centre is a Dudley-based advice and counselling service supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing: <https://www.thewhatcentre.co.uk/>.

<sup>21</sup> Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is the name for the NHS services that treat young people with emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties.



## **Relying on peers and charities to join the dots between services**

Parents and carers share their frustrations around finding information and accessing help and support. They talk about how it feels impossible to get different parts of the 'system' to share and collaborate during the referral process, which means parents and carers have to find ways to connect the dots between services through their own research, peer information and charity support – all of which is exhausting.

In a conversation with a group of parents with children with SEND, Lisa describes her frustrations when accessing support services for her son's care when departments and services aren't working together. Nicola and other parents say they rely on local charities' help to navigate the system: "Services don't speak to each other. We Love Carers<sup>22</sup> has given me so much information. I found out about Integrated Early Years<sup>23</sup> from them, and I had never heard of them before."

Parents say many of the individual support services they used provided excellent care but were frustrated at their lack of visibility to families. Parents say they often found themselves in waiting-room conversations,

directing other parents to the support they needed. Maria says: "It's hard to access services, and there's no joining-up between them. For example, the physio team is excellent when you get access to them. But none of the parents who were at physio when I was there last week knew about Integrated Early Years."

## **Access to appropriate facilities and activities**

Parents and carers face numerous challenges accessing SEND-friendly facilities, leisure services and activities for their children. They say locating appropriate and safe settings that meet their child's needs is difficult. Often they feel discriminated against or stigmatised.

Georgie, a mom of two children, both with additional needs, says: "There's not a lot for our kids. No support groups or SEND activities. There was a special school, but we couldn't get in there. The special needs school was one hour and 30 minutes away. I've had to fight for everything." Alison also says she had difficulties finding suitable nursery care for her daughter. "When I was looking for nurseries, every time I mentioned special needs, they said there was no space."

<sup>22</sup> We Love Carers is a Dudley-based charity offering support, advice and community to unpaid carers: <https://www.welovecarers.org/>.

<sup>23</sup> Integrated Early Years is a service for families with children aged 0-5 years, offering support, training, play sessions and home visits to families living in the Dudley Borough: <https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/early-years-and-childcare/early-years-referral/>.



Parents talk about how badly they've been treated at mainstream play sessions, with people not understanding or accepting of their child's differences. Maria shares, "There's not much for children like ours. You get the tuts and the comments. People pull their children away as if they are going to catch something. It's exhausting."

When suitable activities and settings are located, these were often available at times that would clash with mealtimes or bedtime routines. Parents felt venues did not understand the importance of routine for many children with SEND. Melissa explains, "There's no inclusivity for SEND children. Groups are only available later, around 5pm to 7pm, but that doesn't work for us. They don't understand our children. They need routine; 5pm is teatime and 7pm is bedtime."

### **The impact on parents and siblings**

Parents of children with additional needs described having no time for themselves. Often, they had insufficient time and energy to meet their other children's needs and their own. Many felt that their mental health was negatively impacted by the constant stress of feeling they were letting their families down. They felt unsupported and unseen.

Lisa says she was struggling to cope with a new baby and an adult child with SEND and shares its impact on her mental health: "I've had bad postnatal depression but haven't had help. My oldest child is an adult – she has SEND, but it took almost 18 years for her to be diagnosed. She can't be left alone, and I have the baby too. I'm exhausted and not in a good place, but there's no support."

### **The importance of community and peer support**

Parents, especially single parents, of children with additional needs often feel lonely and exhausted. They appreciate the support provided by charities that offer specialist community and peer support, which they say offers a lifeline. However, they also highlight the urgent need for more services and practitioners with experience in dealing with SEND families and want better representation of their views and experiences. During a conversation with a group of SEND-experienced parents, Georgie's view resonated with the whole group. She says: "If it wasn't for We Love Carers, I would be stuck at home. My life stops. I don't really have time for me."



# Chrissy's challenge navigating neonatal care

Chrissy's journey through motherhood began with her first child's premature birth at 27 weeks due to preeclampsia. This challenging period involved her baby spending five months in various neonatal units, where she faced a lack of information and felt isolated within the healthcare system. A turning point was the invaluable support from a speech therapist, who provided care for her child and emotional support for Chrissy, highlighting the need for better mental health services in neonatal care. With her second premature baby, Chrissy experienced improved healthcare communication but continued to endure significant emotional challenges. Her story emphasises the necessity for consistent mental health support and clear communication in neonatal care, reflecting the gaps in support for parents facing premature births.



## How the Covid-19 pandemic affected families

### Impact in the first 1001 days

The Covid-19 pandemic had widespread impacts on parents-to-be and families. Expectant parents had limited contact with their midwives and other health professionals. They could not access antenatal and breastfeeding classes and other support as services moved online – some people didn't have access to sufficient data or appropriate equipment; others didn't want to connect remotely.

Those who had attended online classes during the pandemic felt that they hadn't worked well and wanted face-to-face support to continue. Tammy, 27, appreciated that the health visiting team had tried to keep support going but didn't feel that the online offer met her needs: "The Dudley health visitors ran a breastfeeding session via Zoom, but it didn't work very well. By the time I set up the phone and held the baby, I couldn't see what was happening on screen...then the phone would fall over; it was a nightmare. I want these things to be face-to-face. It's not the same online."

Parents were often unable to be together for the birth of their child, and moms who'd had babies during this time often described feeling scared and alone. Sarah tells us about her experience:

"I was induced with both my children, and during my second child's birth, my partner couldn't come in because of Covid, which was difficult. I found this so hard, being in the hospital on my own."

### Impact on children's development and school readiness

Parents of young children described how the pandemic lockdowns resulted in developmental delays around socialisation, speech and language, which made them concerned about their child's readiness to transition to nursery or school. Mark, a dad of two, described how the lockdowns impacted his youngest daughter: "The lockdowns happened just before our first daughter turned one. She had a lot of issues after. She refused to hold our hands, and she walked behind us all the time. So that was a challenge for us as well...she eventually came out of that, but that was a bit of a challenging period."

Parents were grateful for the support of nurseries and playgroups, which played an important role in supporting young children's development and ensuring their readiness for school. Mags says: "Our daughter was a Covid baby, and she was a bit shy and slower with her socialising. We were worried about her speech and language when she went to nursery, but she's doing okay and is catching up. Nursery has been good for her development and getting her ready for school."



## **How the pandemic affected teenagers**

Parents of older children talked about the detrimental impact of home-schooling and home working on the whole family's wellbeing. Most parents felt that life had returned to normal, and that the pandemic had few long-term effects on their teenagers. A couple of parents felt differently and say that the children experienced anxiety during the pandemic, struggled to do schoolwork online, fell behind, and disengaged from school when everything 'returned to normal'. Viv says that since the pandemic, her son has been worried about his future: "He had plans to travel and go to university...now he seems fearful about everything and just wants to stay at home. We've encouraged him...It feels like his world has shrunk, just as his future should be opening up."

## **What is missing and needed for parents and carers in Dudley?**

This section identifies the services, structures and support parents and carers say are missing and needed in Dudley and highlights what they think is vital for a thriving future. From more personalised healthcare services to enhanced support for families with SEND, this section lays out the critical areas where the community feels support could be stronger. The insights gathered here are invaluable, as they come directly from the families who stand to benefit from improved policies and services, ensuring that the recommendations are not just theoretically sound but practically grounded.

## **Meeting the needs of Dudley's parents, carers and families**

Parents value Dudley for its green spaces, well-kept parks and warm community. It's more than just a place to live; it's home and is seen by many parents as a nurturing environment for raising children. Among these positives, however, parents highlight areas in need of improvement.

### **Feeling seen and heard**

The journey of parenthood starts with a desire to be seen, heard and respected, regardless of age, background or experience. Parents yearn for a nurturing environment where they can ask for help without shame and build trust with healthcare professionals through consistent relationships. They want a support system that understands their unique needs and circumstances, providing them with information they can trust.

Explaining how she feels, Rachael, a mum of a boisterous toddler, says: "It's crucial that we're not just another number in the system...things like I want my health visitor to actually get to know us...[My son] is high energy, but there's nothing wrong....I have to explain each time, and I feel judged each time until they get to know me and can see he's happy." Her feelings underscore a widespread desire for more personalised attention and empathetic support from healthcare professionals throughout the parenting journey.



## **Inclusive mental health**

The mental health challenges of parenthood are significant, especially in the postnatal period. This period can be a challenging time, marked by loneliness and isolation. John shares his experience of feeling overwhelmed: "After our baby was born, I felt overwhelmed but didn't know where to turn. We need services that understand the mental health challenges dads can face too, not just moms."

New parents need accessible and empathetic mental health support and resources to help them cope and support each other, emphasising the wellbeing and happiness of the whole family and individuals.

## **Dads in the picture**

Dudley's fathers want to be active participants in their children's lives, but they often feel left out. Curtis, a full-time working dad, expresses his wish: "Dad-focused activities, like Stay and Play sessions, would be great. They should be available on weekends or after 5pm when dads are more available." Making these activities available outside typical working hours would encourage more fathers to participate actively in their children's lives.

Dads also want dad-to-dad peer support. They envision a community where dads can openly discuss parenting challenges, seek advice and support from their peers, but recognise that there are many barriers to engaging fathers. These include social norms around childcare and perceptions of the 'father's role' within a family, as well as more practical barriers like working hours and availability.

## **Building supportive communities through peer support**

Parents spoke at length about their loneliness, and emphasised the importance of forging connections with others who understand their journey. They seek opportunities to meet like-minded people, share their concerns and offer mutual support. Georgie says: "I want to socialise with other moms who have autistic children, parents who understand and don't judge." Amy feels similarly: "Finding other parents who have been through similar challenges has been my saving grace. More groups or communities where we can share and support each other would mean a lot." Georgie's longing for connections with other parents of autistic children and Amy's reliance on shared experiences underscore the importance of creating strong networks for mutual understanding and support.



# Kayla's path in Coseley

Kayla, a 26-year-old mother of four, is currently staying at a mother-and-baby unit away from her home in Coseley. She grapples with feelings of judgement and misunderstanding about her parenting. While not home, the unit provides her with a sense of support and direction. Her engagement with Home-Start brings practical help and empathetic listening, crucial for her mental wellbeing and personal growth. Kayla's journey is about finding strength and support in unexpected places and striving to be a better person and a good parent.



## Addressing affordability and accessibility

Affordability is a challenge, and parents find it difficult to access services that won't break the bank. They need reasonably priced or free activities and support, especially single parents who juggle childcare and household expenses single-handedly.

Lisa and Anna's struggles illustrate the financial challenges many parents face. Single mom Lisa says: "I struggle to find activities that fit my budget. It's not just about affordability; it's also about finding activities suitable for different age groups in my family." Anna, 24, mom of a toddler, agrees: "It's tough to take care of yourself. Gym visits mean finding childcare and money is tight. I'd love to join an exercise group that welcomes parents with their children."

## Accessible and reliable information

Parents need easier access to information about available services, activities and support groups. They say that they miss Family Centres but are often unaware of their local Family Hubs' offer. As Curtis said, "I don't see anything on social media about activities for parents or families or the Hubs. It could be communicated better."

Sophie's frustration with accessing information highlights the need for a centralised information hub that makes it simple to find help when needed. She says: "I often hear about events and groups through word of mouth, but it's hit or miss. Having a reliable, centralised place to find all this information would make life so much easier for parents like me. A centralised hub with clear information would be a great help."

New parents want to get out and meet others. They want structure and routine and opportunities to socialise, but they are also often nervous to join groups because of a lack of information about what to expect. Anjay says: "There was a poster about a playgroup, but I didn't know what we would be doing or who would be there, so it took a while to build up the nerve to go...it was lovely....more information would have been helpful."

## Extra support for young parents

Young parents in Dudley need more personalised, tailored support. Not all young families are eligible for Family Nurse Partnership (FNP)<sup>24</sup> support, but many young parents need extra care. They face unique challenges and often feel overlooked or judged. Care leavers and young people who have experienced trauma often face additional barriers to accessing support as young parents.

<sup>24</sup> Family Nurse Partnership is a strengths-based NHS programme for supporting first-time parents aged 24 and under from early pregnancy until their child is aged between one and two: <https://fnp.nhs.uk/>.

Creating resources and support groups specifically designed for young parents, especially fathers and vulnerable parents such as care leavers, is essential to address their unique needs and barriers to accessing appropriate support. Single parent Asha, 19, explains, as a care leaver, she's always tried to avoid asking for help: "It's usually better if people don't know everything. You front it out and kind of put on a brave face.... It's hard to ask for help, and you act like everything is fine, so people think you're fine."

### **More investment in outdoor play**

Parents want to see their children spend less time on screens and more time embracing outdoor play – for both their physical and mental health. Parents feel strongly that outdoor play should be prioritised. Parents want their children to have access to safe play spaces and hope for more investments in inclusive outdoor activities that cater to diverse needs and abilities. They highlighted the need for investment in facilities. Grandma of five, Eira, sums it up: "We need more grassroots funding, and they [the Council] need to mend the pitches so kids can play."

### **Better support for families with special educational needs and disabilities**

#### **Better support needed around special needs diagnosis**

The process of obtaining a diagnosis for special educational needs is challenging. Parents call for greater advocacy, support and transparent communication from healthcare providers. They feel that it is crucial to receive an early diagnosis and appropriate care, as timely intervention can significantly impact the development and wellbeing of children with SEND, but they often feel they have to fight for their concerns to be taken seriously and for their child to be assessed.

Families with children with SEND require more targeted support from specialist professionals in inclusive environments. They need guidance to navigate the often-complex healthcare and educational systems and appreciate consistency in services. As Eleanor explains, it's frustrating to figure out what support is available and not be able to talk to anyone else because all the services are separate and detached: "You bang your head against the wall trying to work out what support you can get, and then you can't get anyone to talk to anyone else because all the services are in these silos...They need to join up because we can't do that as well as looking after our kids"

#### **Streamlined access to specialised services and tailored support**

Parents need effective and streamlined support systems that are easier to navigate and more



responsive to the specific needs of SEND families; they face unique and often daunting challenges. The complexity of navigating support systems for their children's needs can be overwhelming. For instance, Bina's move to Dudley for better support services underscores many parents' experiences when the system fails to provide appropriate support. She says, "It's draining. I moved to Dudley for my son. The system in Barnsley completely failed him....Dudley is much better, but there's still a lack of specialist support. It's hard to get as much help as we need."

Accessing appropriate nurseries and other essential services proves challenging for parents. It's also difficult to find services that cater to specific needs and disabilities. As Alison, a former SEND teacher, emphasises: "It's not merely about access to resources; it's about ensuring that these services understand and effectively cater to our needs...I've struggled, and this is supposed to be my area...I taught kids with SEND, but I didn't realise until I had to navigate my way around the system with my own child."

### **Inclusive activities for SEND children**

The lack of suitable and inclusive activities for children with SEND is a significant gap in current service provisions. Parents need activities that can accommodate their children's specific routines and abilities. The lack of inclusivity not only limits opportunities for SEND children to engage in meaningful activities but also adds to the isolation and challenges faced by their families.

Carolanne, a parent with one child with SEND and two other children, says her family is restricted in terms of where they can go: "I have one child who's SEND and two who aren't. We're restricted as to where we go because there's nothing accessible and affordable.... Stuff for SEND kids doesn't exist, and mainstream sessions don't work...Looking after [my son] is a full-time job, and I have to rely on my kids' help, too. We need places and activities that cater for our needs....Nobody thinks about what it's like for families like ours, with a mix of SEND and non-SEND kids if they think about SEND at all!"



# **Children's and Young People's Stories**

This section offers a window into the lives of Dudley's younger residents, capturing their unique viewpoints and experiences. It delves into the perspectives of children and young people across various age groups, revealing their thoughts on growing up in Dudley, their daily activities and their feelings about the community around them. From the joys of local parks and nature reserves to the challenges of finding safe and engaging activities, this section uncovers their needs, hopes and concerns. It provides crucial insights into the world as seen through their eyes, emphasising the importance of considering their voices in shaping a community that meets their diverse needs and aspirations.

### **What children and young people think of Dudley**

Dudley is a green and vibrant town in the eyes of its youngest residents. Although they notice problems with littering and dog poo, younger children feel happy and safe in Dudley overall. Like eight-year-old Alex, primary school children cherish their walks to school and visits to the local parks, libraries and nature reserves. Alexia says: "I like going to parks and seeing nature. It feels green." Nine-year-old Summera agrees: I like Dudley. It's a good place to grow up; it feels calm and safe." This sentiment is shared by several older children, too, who appreciate the town's libraries and leisure centres, viewing them as valuable community assets.

Contrastingly, the perspective shifts among teenagers. For them, Dudley appears less idyllic, marred by problems like littering, homelessness and antisocial behaviour. Many feel that Dudley has little to offer young people. Fifteen-year-old Jake candidly describes his viewpoint: "Dudley is a s\*\*\*hole." Similarly, 16-year-old Josh feels that: "Dudley is a place you want to pass through, not live in." For 14-year-old Ben: "The best thing about Dudley is its vape shops."

### **How young people spend their time**

In their spare time, primary-school-age children and younger teens talked about attending after-school activities such as sports and social clubs, including football, dance, chess club, boxing, martial arts and swimming, as well as Brownies, Guides, Scouts and Cadets. Several older teens talked about playing football or basketball with friends in local parks. Twelve-year-old Ebony finds a peaceful escape in the local parks: "I like to go to the park with my friends. It's calming." Meanwhile, football-mad Jeziah, 15, practises at his local park: "I go to Priory Park...I go there every day to play football."

Often, young people described feeling frustrated with the lack of options for affordable activities and places to go with friends. With little else to do, young people across Dudley talked about spending too much time alone in their bedrooms playing computer games, watching videos on



YouTube and TikTok, communicating with friends on Snapchat or scrolling through Instagram. These activities were mentioned most frequently by young people aged between 12 to 15 years old. Fourteen-year-old Briony voices a common concern: "I spend most of my time in my room because there's not much else to do."

Time with friends often involves hanging out at shopping malls or fast-food restaurants and smoking weed (cannabis) or vaping, which quickly loses its novelty. As 15-year-old Maisie explains: "There's nothing else to do, so you just go out with your friends to a fast-food restaurant. That's money that a lot of people don't have. And also, it's unhealthy." Fourteen-year-olds Jonah and Kitty felt the same. Jonah says, "There's nothing to do except vape, really. There are loads of vape shops, and it's easy to get vapes without ID, especially in Stourbridge; nobody cares how old you are."

## **Leisure facilities and social activities**

Exercising was often discussed by young people as a means to manage stress and anxiety and a good way to have fun with friends. Still, young people are often frustrated with the poor repair of local facilities. They describe issues such as broken glass on basketball courts, missing nets on football goals, broken gym equipment in parks and dog poo on pitches. Seventeen-year-old Ezra told us basketball courts aren't in the best

condition: "Many of the rings don't have nets. If they did, it would be easier to play. 100% I would like to see this change."

The poor state of facilities is especially frustrating for young people who value sports for their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. Fifteen-year-old Eric explains, "Gyms in parks are a good idea for young people...exercise helps you handle stress better, and the park gym equipment is free, but they are mostly out of order or vandalised, so you can't use them.... what's the point?"

## **Feeling unsafe**

### **Antisocial behaviour and crime**

Feeling unsafe is a pressing concern for young people in Dudley, who identified gangs, knife crime, drug users and other antisocial behaviours as barriers to using and enjoying local spaces for recreation and wellbeing. Seventeen-year-old Kate says: "Parks could be good places to go with friends and for mental health – green spaces are important, but there are too many drug users in parks." This makes them feel unsafe, especially later in the day. Similarly, fourteen-year-old Marley shares how gangs in his local park prevent him from going there: "There are gangs in the parks, so we can't go. Me and my missus want to take her little sister, who has Down's Syndrome, but we don't go...it's not safe."



A perceived lack of safety isn't limited to parks, though. Young people talked about feeling unsafe across Dudley. Gangs were a bit of a problem in many areas, with many young people, like 14-year-old Keisha, telling us that they simply avoided going out: "There's nowhere to hang out with friends. We just go to each other's houses. We don't feel safe anywhere, really." Seventeen-year-old Cory feels the same: "There are lots of gangs. I'm constantly scared to turn corners."

### **Problem areas**

As well as highlighting the problems of antisocial behaviour and gangs, young people describe feeling unsafe walking and travelling by bus. For Emmanuel, 17, who enjoys the independence of getting around on foot, fears about safety are an issue: "Most things are walking distance from my house. Like, I walk to the gym...Sometimes, it doesn't feel safe walking. Safety depends on the time of day and place, particularly the bus station, as that's where people go to chill, smoke and drink. It's uncomfortable walking past and I worry about knives." Other young people from minority groups feel particularly vulnerable when walking. Nineteen-year-old Pami says, "Walking feels dodgy, even in broad daylight, especially as a minority."

Certain parts of Dudley, like the market and bus station, feel particularly unsafe to young people. They say the lack of lighting and security cameras attracts gangs, drug users and crime. Fifteen-year-old Zane sums up what several young people shared: "Being a young person can be nerve-racking in Dudley; the bus station and the market don't feel safe, especially on weekends. There are always fights." Joie also describes constantly looking over her shoulder walking through Dudley: "The main bit of Dudley town feels unsafe. There are no cameras, no security, no deterrents from crime, and there are lots of dark places with no lighting."

Several young people say that while they felt unsafe in places like the bus station, they had no other option. As 20-year-old Taylor explains: "I dislike waiting for the bus – I don't feel safe but rely on it."

### **Experiences of harassment and discrimination**

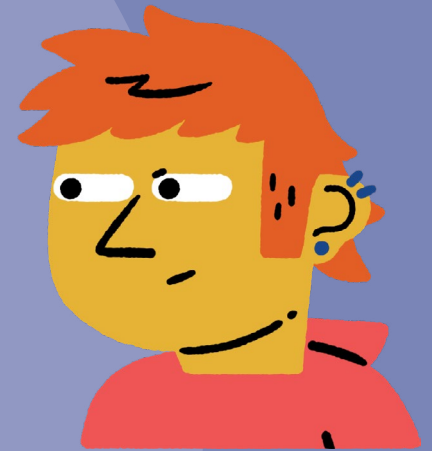
Harassment and discrimination are common experiences for many young people. Instances of catcalling, name-calling, and even physical assault are common, especially for young women and LGBTQ+ young people.<sup>25</sup> Several say they regularly feel unsafe and have changed their routines or behaviours to minimise the risk of harm.



<sup>25</sup> Lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, queer, asexual and other gender identity communities.

# Alder's journey of self-expression in Dudley

Alder is an 18-year-old, neurodivergent trans person who navigates Dudley with caution. They've learned to adapt their appearance, choosing clothes that draw less attention in a bid to avoid the harsh realities of being targeted for their identity, especially when travelling alone on the bus home from work. For Alder, the journey to self-expression is fraught with challenges. They long for a Dudley where safety is not a luxury but a given – a place where they can be their true self without fear. Alder's story is a poignant reminder of the need for safe, inclusive spaces where all young people, regardless of their identity, can feel accepted and protected.



With resignation, 18-year-old Alder describes their coping strategy: "I don't feel safe. I have to change how I dress to be safe. I wear a hoodie and cover-up to avoid attention. Whenever I work late, I have to take the bus home, and I feel unsafe walking home. Stourbridge on a Saturday night is scary. I finish work at 10.30pm and have to walk back in the dark. There are street lights, but the council don't switch them all on, so it's really dark."

A couple of young people also described their experiences of being physically assaulted. Twenty-two-year-old Carrie describes how she was physically and verbally assaulted on the bus and mocked because of her disabilities, but nobody helped. Young women, trans and non-binary young people also talked about the trauma of being touched and taunted by strangers and feeling they had nowhere to turn to for help or support and no means to report the incidents. Taylor shares, "Violence against LGBTQ people is not addressed."

Sixteen-year-old Ana describes how, without support, the victims of assault can often feel ashamed: "I have several friends who have been assaulted on the streets in Dudley – just random people touching you, but nobody speaks about it. There's a lot of shame and secrecy around sexual harassment and assault. You feel it's somehow your fault."

Many young people felt that a greater police presence would be valuable and make them feel safer. However, young people of colour were more ambivalent. Seventeen-year-old Moise says: "I want more police presence, but I'm also scared about what the police will do. They might see you and assume you're the problem. That's how it is."

## **Young people's wellbeing**

### **Pressures on young people**

Almost all our conversations with teenagers involved discussions about mental health and wellbeing. Young people feel under pressure in many areas of their lives – from coping with schoolwork and fitting in with friends, to handling relationships and thinking about their futures – and sometimes it feels hard. Thirteen-year-old Bec shares, "There's lots of pressure on young people in different parts of our lives: pressure to grow up and be an adult and schoolwork is overwhelming." Fifteen-year-old Mary adds, "Childhood isn't fun anymore. You spend childhood wishing to be an adult, and then you realise it's not good."

Twenty-year-old Carrie struck a chord with several people in our group conversation about the challenges facing young people as they transition to adulthood. She says: "We are a generation with so many expectations on us."



## **Bullying**

Bullying was commonly discussed as a cause of poor mental health for 13-15-year-olds. Slightly older disabled, neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ young people also reflected on the pervasive nature of bullying in the digitally connected world and the lasting negative impacts of their experiences. Twelve-year-old Zoey describes her experiences of being bullied online: "It's not just bullying; it's people telling you to go kill yourself. That seems to be the thing"

Often, young people worry alone or only share with their closest friends that they are being bullied. They feel that telling a parent or teacher will make things worse or won't make any difference and leave them feeling even more alone. Reflecting on their school experiences, 20-year-old Taylor says: "I was bullied at school for four years. My experience was horrible. It is supposed to be a school that helps people who are neurodivergent and with ADHD, and no one listened to me. It made me go quiet, and that's what happens: the bullies make you go quiet. These anti-bullying campaigns do jack s\*\*t"

## **Getting help and support**

Young people in Dudley face a challenging task when seeking support. Many of them find it difficult to trust their teachers, and a stigma is associated with asking for help. Even when young people do reach out for assistance, the

responses they receive are often mixed. While some feel supported, others feel ignored or misunderstood.

Many young people we spoke with say they usually seek help and support from their parents or teachers, but they recognised that this may be more difficult for young people who aren't close to their families. They also felt that some issues would be too difficult, embarrassing or private to risk discussing with family or teachers. In these circumstances, they say they felt unsure where to turn. Young people were largely unaware of support and resources outside of school unless they had seen them on social media. Fourteen-year-old Isaac shares, "Sometimes, there are teachers you can trust, but I wouldn't speak to teachers because you can't be sure where that info will go."

Fifteen-year-old George shares that getting the right help can be tricky even if young people seek support: "It's only easy to find help and support if you go to a good school. Sometimes, even your parents may not know how to help, and that makes it harder."

Across conversations, young people also agree that shame and embarrassment often prevent them from seeking help and advice on the issues that matter in their lives. Merle says: "There's a lot of stigma around accessing help and support for sexual and mental health. It's really difficult for young people to get the help they want and need."



# Liam's path to adulthood

Liam, age 17, stands at a crossroads in Dudley, facing the challenges of adolescence while pondering the responsibilities of adult life. He sees the potential in his hometown but is also keenly aware of the limited opportunities that might shape his transition into adulthood. For Liam, navigating the path to independence involves more than just finding a job or furthering his education; it's about learning the intricacies of 'adulthood' – managing finances, making informed decisions and understanding the nuances of the working world. His story echoes the sentiments of many young people in Dudley, who crave more than just youth-centric activities. They seek guidance and support in developing life skills essential for adulthood. Liam's vision for the future includes a community that not only listens to its younger members but also actively prepares them for the challenges and responsibilities of adult life, providing them with the tools and resources to thrive as confident, capable adults.



## **Mental health support**

Several young people said they had looked for mental health support from parents, schools or online, with mixed results. Schools' responses varied widely, with some young people saying they felt well-supported by teachers while others felt belittled. Young people receiving mental health support also say that there seems to be no joining up between community and statutory mental health support and schools, which often makes being at school while experiencing anxiety or depression even harder.

"I've been on the waiting list for CAMHS for over a year. I was desperate for help, so I'm thankful for the What Centre, where I got counselling," shares Emily, 16, reflecting a common frustration among young people seeking help.

Several young people we spoke to had been referred to CAMHS services but were frustrated to find long waiting lists or given medication without feeling heard and understood.

Highlighting the challenges in the existing support system, Alex, 15, tells us: "I'm under CAMHS, and they're s\*\*t; they don't listen, they just give you pills...When I'm stressed, I smoke weed."

Some young people benefit from mental health support, including talking therapies, via voluntary sector services, depending on their needs and

ability to find and access these services. Others were trying to self-manage their mental health without, or alongside, more formal support, using exercise, drugs and alcohol. "The best thing teenagers have [to help them cope] is to go out and get drunk and forget about everything because our mental health is decreasing and because of all the pressure on teenagers today," explains Jordan, 18, voicing a coping mechanism used by several of the young people we spoke with.

In one group conversation, young people agreed that some services offer help but fail to meet young people's needs. "Lots of services are helpers, not healers. They tokenistically try to meet our needs, but they don't or can't," says Mia, 15, summarising the sentiment of many young individuals we talked to.

## **Thinking about the future**

### **Concerns about climate change and loss of green spaces**

Young people's thoughts about the future vary widely. For younger children in primary school, the future seemed far away and hard to imagine. They tend to feel optimistic about what's ahead. Still, several conversations also highlighted children's concerns about climate change and the loss of green spaces for nature. Several teenagers also talked about climate change and broader



environmental concerns. They shared worries that Dudley's green spaces would disappear.

## **Is there a future for young people in Dudley?**

Teenagers often had negative views of their prospects in Dudley. Echoing the uncertainty among his peers, 16-year-old Liam says: "I don't see a future in Dudley."

Some of the young people we spoke with planned to leave Dudley after school or college and move away for university. Others expected they'd stay despite their concerns about a lack of opportunities for young people because "it's home." "I don't really think there are any opportunities for young people in Dudley...nothing to do, and there are no jobs...it's a bit of a dead end," says 16-year-old Precious, highlighting the perceived lack of prospects in the area.

The feeling of being unheard was also a common thread in our conversations. "I have no hope for the future because everything is going to stay the same because no one is going to listen to kids," shares Oliver, 15, reflecting the deep sense of resignation and frustration many young people in Dudley feel.

## **What's missing from local provision for young people**

This section focuses on the specific needs and gaps in services for children and young people in Dudley, as identified through their own voices and experiences. It delves into what young residents feel is lacking in their community and what they believe would significantly improve their daily lives and future prospects. This part of the report is crucial in understanding the unique challenges faced by the younger generation and in guiding the development of policies and services that resonate with their specific needs and aspirations.

### **Spaces, places and facilities young people value**

During our conversations, young people of all ages from across Dudley identified a wide range of spaces, activities and services that they were aware of, whether they use them or not, as well as those they use and value, including:

- **Green spaces, parks and nature reserves**
- **Indoor sports clubs, including boxing clubs and martial arts**
- **Outdoor sports facilities such as basketball courts, football pitches and outdoor gyms**
- **Libraries**



- Youth clubs
- Drama and dance groups
- Faith groups
- Museums
- Support and social groups, including for neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ young people and young carers and care experienced young people.

Several of the activities and facilities young people discussed have closed due to lack of funding, and others no longer exist or are no longer usable. Young people say they were worried about further closures but seemed resigned to them happening.

### **Safe spaces for socialising with friends**

Young people of all ages talked about the lack of informal social spaces to hang out with friends and take a break from the pressures of being a teenager. They wanted places to chat and relax, where they wouldn't feel judged by adults. Currently, the only spots young people feel they have are local parks, but these parks often feel unsafe due to antisocial behaviour.

"Teenagers are judged wherever they go. Me and my friends, we're respectable but people look at us like we're going to cause trouble. It would be nice to have somewhere where we don't have to think about feeling judged," shares Poppy, 16,

expressing a common desire for judgement-free zones.

The absence of such spaces affects how teenagers cope with their daily lives. "There's nothing to help distract teenagers or help us escape the pressures a bit...so we turn to drugs, vaping and alcohol," admits 16-year-old Lizzy, highlighting the choices some young people make in the absence of better alternatives.

### **Affordable ways to keep physically and mentally fit**

Keeping physically and mentally fit was a priority for many of the young people we talked with. They use exercise to manage stress and anxiety and to boost their self-esteem. However, challenges exist depending on age and financial resources. Younger teens mentioned that junior gym memberships at local leisure centres aren't ideal, as they often required parental supervision. For older teens, the cost of gym memberships posed a significant barrier.

"I'd like more youth clubs, leisure facilities, fitness spaces, better gym equipment in parks and more swimming places," says 15-year-old Alice.

Older teens, especially those over 16, face higher gym membership costs, which can be tough for families during a cost-of-living crisis. Young people living independently, like care leavers, often find it hard to afford such expenses.



# Alex's independent struggle in Dudley

Alex, a 19-year-old care leaver, navigates the challenges of independent living in Dudley on a tight budget. Residing in a CHADD housing scheme, they are grateful for the support and stability, but a sense of loneliness often colours their daily life. The gym has become a haven for Alex, offering more than physical wellness — it's a place of emotional respite. "It's one of the few places where I feel better," Alex admits. "It's not just about staying fit. It's a place to go, to just be for a while." Feeling adrift in Dudley, Alex sees little in the town that inspires or engages them. "I don't see much that's good here. It feels like I'm stuck, just passing time." Their story resonates with many young adults transitioning out of care, underscoring the need for more than just basic support — a call for systems that nurture connection, purpose and a genuine sense of belonging.



"No matter what, it makes you feel so good, so it feels important for everyone that gyms and leisure centres are accessible," says Noel, 17, emphasising the importance of fitness for mental wellbeing. Eighteen-year-old Carter also felt that gyms were vital for his wellbeing: "The gym is a place to let off steam when you feel bad."

Pointing out the financial constraints many young people face, care leaver, Tabitha, 18, says: "I would like to use gyms more – they make me feel good – but affordability is a big issue for young people."

Tom, 19, also living independently, finds the cost of gym memberships a stretch but necessary: "You can use the gym in Dudley...it's 25 quid a month, which is quite a lot, but for me, it's essential for my mental health."

Summarising young people's challenges in accessing affordable fitness, Jesse, 17 says: "When you have something on your mind, you can always rely on going to the gym and working out; it helps. The gym isn't that affordable to access though; prices have gone up. And the gym equipment in parks is usually broken, so that's not an option."

## **Spaces to escape the pressures and have fun**

Young people, especially young carers and those facing challenging family circumstances, express a strong need for spaces where they can get away from the pressures of home and school to study or relax. While local libraries are used by some for studying, they often lack the flexibility to fully meet young people's needs.

Olivia, 15, attends a young carers group and her words highlight the need for dedicated spaces for young people with caregiving responsibilities. She says: "My brother is autistic, so school is my only break. I would like to have somewhere I could go just to be me for a few hours."

Young people attending the young carers group also value having a space where they can be understood and not feel like outsiders. Sophie, 15, suggests: "More groups are needed for young people with shared experiences and challenges to help people feel less like outsiders."

Youth groups are crucial in providing such environments for some young people. "Youth groups are important. I like CreArt<sup>26</sup> because people treat each other with respect, and I like the activities," says Aiden, 14.



<sup>26</sup> CreArt Collective is a Dudley-based social enterprise that challenges systemic inequalities through community arts. It offers a safe and empowering space for Black and migrant children and young people to explore and celebrate their heritage: <https://creartcollectivecic.org/>.

# Sophie's struggle with mental health

Sophie, age 15, faces the complexities of teenage life in Dudley. She grapples with anxiety and the pressures of fitting in and performing well at school. The pandemic has intensified these challenges, leaving her to navigate a path back to 'normal life' alone. She is unable to share how she feels with her parents and is worried school will worsen everything if she tells them what's happening. She's not sure where she can get help or advice. Sophie's story highlights the need for accessible mental health support in Dudley, a support system that understands and responds to the unique challenges faced by young people like her.



Highlighting the need for tranquil spaces away from potentially stressful home environments, Jack, 16, says: "I need a place for peace and quiet. Home is not always a good place to be." The importance of having a retreat from family life was also voiced by Ella, 17: "It's important to have spaces to get away from family members."

### **A wider range of activities**

The young people in Dudley have voiced that the activities offered across the area lack diversity. While football and boxing clubs are plentiful and easily accessible, there's a noticeable gap in less popular sports and non-sporting activities. This lack of variety leaves many young people unsure whether such activities don't exist in Dudley or if the information about them is hard to find.

"There aren't really any clubs apart from Brownies or Guides, and they aren't for everyone," points out Roisin, 14, highlighting the need for more varied options.

Interest in local chess clubs or coding clubs was expressed by several individuals, alongside a desire for all-gender activities to ensure inclusivity. Youth clubs were a common topic of discussion, with several people mentioning their recent attendance. Unfortunately, two attendees of the same youth club shared the sad news that its funding had been cut and it was closing permanently.

Ash, 16, expresses frustration with the current state of youth clubs: "We need something instead of the places that are kind of boring and dead... something you want to go to."

While some young people found youth clubs boring in the past, they are open to returning if more modern facilities and activities become available. Young people want to see more outdoor activities like bushcraft or nature walks. Others want music engineering desks but highlight the need for knowledgeable staff or volunteers to ensure it won't be wasted.

"We want youth clubs but multi-activity where you can chill out, make and play music or do sport...I would enjoy using a music studio...music engineering. Some places have equipment, but no one knows how to use it, so it's wasted money," says 15-year-old Saul, envisioning a more dynamic and engaging youth club experience.

Lucy, 15, adds: "I would go to a youth club if they did outdoor activities or bushcraft," indicating a preference for more nature-oriented activities.

### **Spaces and activities for older teens**

Children and young people in Dudley emphasise the need for distinct spaces and activities tailored to different age groups. While they observe that children, younger teens, and adults have various options, they point out a gap for those aged 15-19. This age group often finds that



most available activities, though enjoyable in their younger years, no longer hold the same appeal. "There are swimming places to go to, and I used to go to the Bondi-beat [water disco] at Crystal Leisure Centre every Friday, but you get to a certain age and don't want to do that anymore," says 16-year-old Poppy, reflecting a common sentiment among her peers.

Teenagers, especially those with younger siblings, express a strong desire for spaces where they can spend time without feeling obligated to look after their brothers or sisters. "There's stuff for young kids, but for teenagers, it's bowling or go-karts, and those are pretty much the only two options," observes 17-year-old Luke, pointing out the limited choices for older teens.

Young people in Dudley, especially those aged 15-19, want activities and spaces that cater to their interests and lifestyles. Their views underline an essential gap in local provision and highlight the need to create spaces where older teens feel engaged and valued, away from the activities of their younger years or adult-focused options.

### **Accessible and inclusive spaces**

Across Dudley, autistic young people and those with learning disabilities express a strong desire for more inclusive activities. They are looking for events that cater specifically to people with different support needs and activities that include the whole community.

A common concern is that, apart from the efforts made by support groups, many of the existing activities for people with autism spectrum disorder and SEND are not scheduled at convenient times or locations. They don't completely meet young people's needs.

"We need to improve accessibility in Dudley. It's not good for people with disabilities," says 15-year-old Emma, emphasising the need for better facilities and options for people with disabilities.

In several conversations, Harry's café in Brierley Hill was mentioned as a valuable community space for neurodivergent young people. "Harry's café is an important place for us because it is one of the only safe places we have," shares 16-year-old Jamie, highlighting the importance of having welcoming and secure environments.

Young people feel strongly that inclusive activities that meet the diverse needs of all young people with additional needs and disabilities are missing and are much needed across the Dudley Borough.

### **Tackling racism, gender discrimination,**



# Emma's aspirations in Dudley

Emma, a 16-year-old student, navigates her teenage years in Dudley. Balancing schoolwork with her social life, she finds solace in the town's green spaces yet yearns for more activities tailored to her age group. The lack of safe, engaging spaces for teens to gather and socialise is a constant challenge, making her often retreat to the digital world for connection. Emma dreams of a Dudley that offers more than just parks and playgrounds – a place where young people can thrive, express themselves and explore their interests.



## **transphobia and ableism<sup>27</sup>**

Many young people express concerns about the lack of support for those dealing with discrimination, whether it's because of race, gender, identity or disability. Several have faced tough situations, including verbal and physical harassment, and feel there are limited places to seek help beyond the police. However, they often hesitate to approach the police, fearing their concerns might not be taken seriously.

Young people believe more open conversations about issues like racism and gender intolerance are crucial. By discussing these matters openly, they hope to increase understanding and reduce prejudice in the community. It's also important for them to have a supportive environment to report incidents and talk to someone who understands.

Alder, 18, expressed the need for more awareness and education: "We need more education about different groups – racism, sexism, understanding different gender identities and sexualities. People often don't know how to interact respectfully with those who are different from them. This lack of understanding affects us as teenagers. We need to learn how to respect and accept everyone."

Many young people want a more inclusive and understanding community in Dudley, where everyone feels safe, accepted and understood, and where education can help bridge gaps in understanding and acceptance.

## **Easier access to sexual and mental health services**

Young people in Dudley don't feel there is enough support available for their sexual and mental health needs. They believe that more focus should be put on early intervention and prevention. They also think more must be done to reduce the stigma around seeking advice and help.

"There definitely needs to be more support in the areas of sexual health and mental health for young people," says 17-year-old Kwame, highlighting the need for better and more accessible services.

A common issue raised was the difficulty in accessing sexual health services. "There's nowhere for sexual health that you can walk in... we went once, and they couldn't see us the same day, and they couldn't book us an appointment either, so we had to leave and phone up," shares 18-year-old Merle, highlighting the barriers young people face in getting timely help.

<sup>27</sup> Racism, gender discrimination, transphobia and ableism is when a person is treated worse, excluded, disadvantaged, harassed, bullied, humiliated or degraded because of their race or ethnicity, gender or disabilities.



The experience of accessing these services also matters. "I went to a sexual-health clinic, but it was hard to find and unwelcoming, and I just felt embarrassed. I wouldn't want to go back. Is that what they're hoping for [laughs]?" says 17-year-old Mikey, pointing out the need for accessible services that are also youth-friendly and welcoming.

Young people want services that are easy to find, welcoming and where they don't feel judged or embarrassed. They think that improving access to sexual and mental health services is crucial in providing the support young people in Dudley need.

### **Support to cope with change and help with 'adulthood'**

Young people in Dudley face challenges during life transitions, such as moving from primary to secondary school, finishing school, entering the workforce and living independently. Elisa, 12, shares her anxiety about transitioning to a much larger secondary school: "It was difficult changing from primary school to secondary school. I struggled with going to secondary school because it's way bigger. My primary school had 600 children and my new school has 8,000. That's a lot of people. I was very anxious for quite a long time."

As young people's need for independence grows, their need for practical skills becomes more apparent. Laif, 16, says young people need more help with 'adulthood': "We need help with 'how to adult'. We also need practical skills courses for young people to help us learn how to manage money, cook and fill in job applications." Aisha, 17, echoes this sentiment: "I want to learn how to handle stress, anxiety and decision-making...how to be an adult, basically."

Transitioning into the working world brings its own set of challenges. Kobi, 18, found it hard to access help for education and work: "It's hard to access help if you are a young person. I needed help to find a college and work experience but haven't found anyone to help." Understanding workplace norms is particularly daunting, as 16-year-old Nicky highlights: "I would like someone to help with getting work but also help with what to expect. How are you supposed to be at work? Is it okay to use your phone...how much can you talk, and how do you know when it's okay to go to the bathroom? Nobody tells you what's expected or how it all works, and it creates a lot of anxiety, especially for people like me, who are autistic, but maybe for everyone."

Securing employment is also a significant concern for young people across Dudley. Sarah, 16, and Chris, 15, emphasised the need for more job opportunities and relevant work experience. "They need to make it easier for us to get jobs...for us to



# Jack's quest for a safe space

At age 14, Jack's perception of Dudley is bittersweet. While he appreciates the community and the familiarity of his neighbourhood, he is increasingly aware of the safety concerns that come with growing up. The presence of gangs and antisocial behaviour in local parks and public areas makes him cautious about where he spends his time. Jack wishes for more than just safe physical spaces for young people; he seeks environments where he feels secure and accepted, spaces where his concerns are acknowledged and addressed.



try out different jobs through work experience," says Sarah. Chris adds: "[Adults] need to make it easier for young people to get jobs...think that's one of the reasons they turn to crime; they have no money." Jess, 15, describes the job hunt as a catch-22: "You can't get a job without experience, but you can't get experience without a job; it feels like an impossible, never-ending circle."

Daniel, 15, suggests improving work experience programmes: "We need to start work experience younger and in wider fields than the current offer. Work experience at 15 is not beneficial. You're not taught properly how to be at a job or the topic doesn't feel relevant. You only get work experience in certain fields."

Young people in Dudley need more support and guidance to navigate the complex journey of growing up, transitioning into adulthood and getting jobs. It feels overwhelming and they don't feel fully equipped to cope.

### **Affordable activities and transport**

In Dudley, young people face challenges with the affordability of activities and transport. Teenagers, often reliant on their parents' financial support, find it hard to manage expenses, particularly if their families have limited budgets. This issue is even more notable for older teens, who may have low incomes and face even tighter budgets if living independently.

Highlighting the general financial strain, 15-year-old Jolie says: "Some of us are really struggling with money. Spending money is a problem when money might be tight. Things that are cheap and free are important."

The cost of transport, especially bus fares, has become a significant concern for many young people. Joelle, 15, notes the direct impact of rising prices on her social life: "Bus prices going up means catching the bus less...going out less." Similarly, 17-year-old James expresses his frustration: "They have raised the price of buses. It was £1.50, but now it is £2.30, which is too much for young people. I can't get to places I want to as often as I want to."

Jazz, 16, echoes these concerns about the affordability of public transport: "Bus prices are too much; a child paying £2.30 to go on the bus doesn't sit right." Lucas, 17, says the fare for young people should be based on when you become an adult by law: "They should keep the bus fare low until you're 18, not 16. I can't afford to pay adult bus fare."

Young people feel it's vital that activities and transport are made more affordable so that financial barriers don't limit their mobility and affect their access to social activities.



## **Easy to find information about what's available for young people**

Finding information about activities, services and support can be a challenge for young people. They often rely on word-of-mouth – from family, friends, neighbours and faith groups – or through school, social media and community notice boards to learn about what's on and available.

"Sometimes, things are advertised but not enough or not in the right places for us to read it. You'll hear about something, and you don't have a way to look into it, so you can't find it. Like Dudley's first Pride was a good idea, but it was under-advertised and hard to find out about," says 18-year-old Alder, highlighting the issue of insufficient publicity for events and services. Echoing this sentiment, 16-year-old Nell says: "I feel like there are probably lots of things to do in Dudley, but they are hidden. There needs to be more publicity."

For those who have left school, the challenge intensifies. "Finding out information if I was still in school would be easy because of the school ambassadors, but now that I've left, it's much harder," shares 17-year-old Harrison, pointing out the gap in information dissemination post-school.

The lack of awareness also extends to specific services and support. "The council needs to tell young people what's available to them...I have a disabled person's bus pass, and everyone [in the autism support group] could have one, but nobody knows they exist," mentions 19-year-old Lucy, emphasising the need for better communication.

Young people want better and more specific information about the activities and services available to them. They want to know where to find trustworthy and up-to-date information that is accessible and well-advertised for all age groups.



# **Conclusions and Priorities for Action**

Growing Up in Dudley provides a vivid snapshot of life in Dudley, drawing on the perspectives of parents, carers, children and young people. These true stories collectively depict the community's strengths, challenges and long-term needs.

Parents emphasise the need for more comprehensive and empathetic support that addresses various aspects of family life, including accessible mental health services, more community-based support networks and better parenting and child development resources. Fathers highlighted a need for more recognition and support in their parenting roles, indicating a broader necessity for family services that include all caregivers.

Dudley's children and young people want safe, inclusive social spaces. They call for a variety of recreational activities, improved safety in public areas, easier-to-access mental health support, and additional support with transitions to adulthood. Their candid perspectives, ranging from the appreciation of green spaces to concerns about antisocial behaviour and limited opportunities, highlight the importance of their involvement in future service design and community planning.

For families raising children with SEND, their experiences vividly illustrate their struggles in getting a diagnosis and appropriate support. Parents emphasise the need for more inclusive

and understanding education and health services. From the community's perspective, the following areas are priorities for action:

- **Make information and support more accessible:** Develop more accessible services and support for parents, explicitly including dads and families with SEND children. Parents want more opportunities to meet peers with similar circumstances and to create support networks. They want earlier support with a SEND diagnosis and referral and clear referral pathways to joined-up services. All young people want support that meets their needs without stigma or shame, and they want to feel heard.
- **Offering more inclusive mental health support:** Make mental health services more accessible to parents and young people by creating better access to information and more tailored support. For example, creating a support offer for new dads or a tailored approach with trauma-experienced new parents to reduce barriers to support. Understand more about the gaps in mental health provision for young people, at schools and within the community, and why young people feel there are "helpers, not healers" and that their mental health support needs often remain unmet.
- **Supporting SEND families:** Families with SEND children need more streamlined



support and clearer communication between various systems. They need easier access to information and more support around seeking a diagnosis and getting practical support. Parents of SEND children need better mental health support. They also want more visibility and say in the design of services that affect their families.

- **Accessible information:** Families want a central hub for reliable, up-to-date information on available local services and activities. Parents say they miss Family Centres but families are unaware of their local Family Hubs.
- **Develop inclusive, affordable spaces and activities:** Create more inclusive and engaging social spaces and activities for children and teenagers, including families with children with SEND, who are often simultaneously caring for children with additional needs and their siblings. Parents want to get their children off screens and into fresh air. They want more investment in grassroots sports and outdoor play. Young people want safe spaces to socialise and escape the pressure of school without judgement. Some, especially those with siblings with SEND or chaotic family lives, want a safe space to escape home for a while.
- **Focus on community safety:** Address safety concerns in parks, town centres, and other public areas to improve the living conditions

for young residents. Start community conversations with parents, young people and diverse stakeholders about what's needed and possible across the Borough.

- **Support people to increase their physical and mental health and wellbeing:** Enable people of all ages to care for their physical and mental health and wellbeing through community connection with peers and exercise. Parents want affordable exercise classes they can take their babies to (or with a crèche offer). They also want places and activities to get them out of the house, provide structure to their day and offer support through social contact and peer support. Young people often manage anxiety and low mood through exercise and want affordable ways to exercise.
- **Deepen engagement and coproduce services and support:** Adults, children, and young people want to feel heard and respected, and they want to play an active role in shaping the policies and services that affect them. Ensure that community services and policies are developed with direct input from adults and young people. Across conversations, people of all ages and backgrounds valued the opportunity Growing Up in Dudley created for them to share their stories and feel heard. Minority groups especially feel that their views and voices are underrepresented and want more visibility.



Growing Up in Dudley highlights the gap between the current provisions and the needs of the community and provides valuable insights to help commissioners, policymakers, service providers and community organisations take dynamic actions to respond to community needs. Although this is the end of the report, it is not the end of the conversation, but rather the beginning of a new chapter in the Growing Up in Dudley story. The first part of the story was about listening to the community and understanding their concerns. The next phase involves collaboration between service providers and the community to improve the future for children, young people and families in Dudley Borough. By working together, innovative solutions can be found to help everyone improve their opportunities and thrive.

