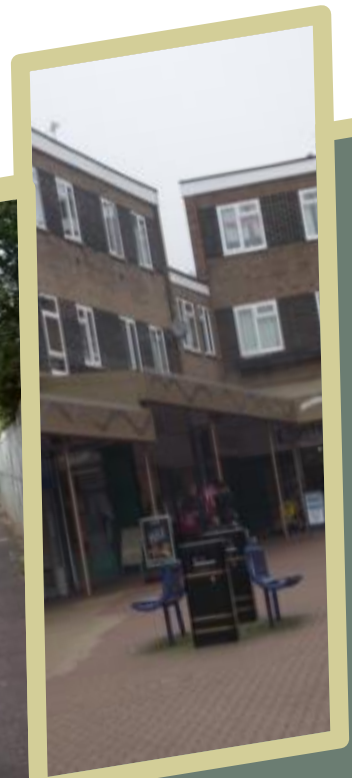
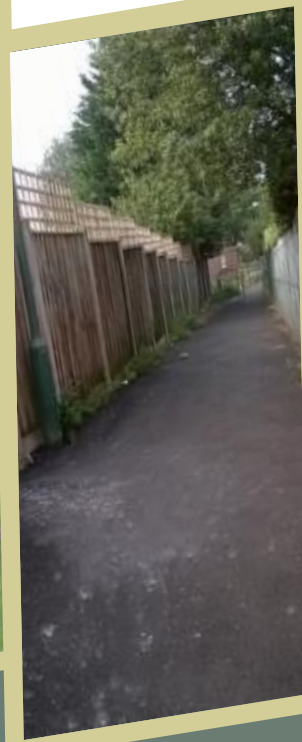
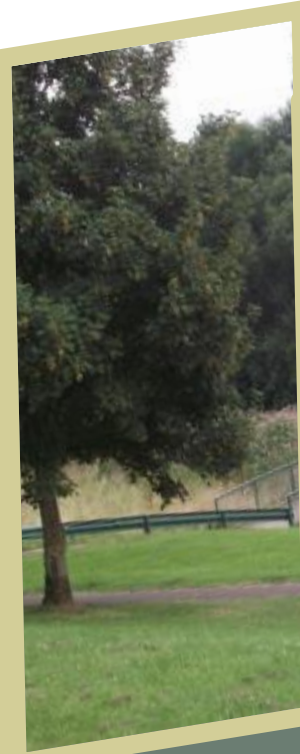


# EXPERIENCES OF FAMILIES LIVING IN KINGSHURST, NORTH SOLIHULL

A REPORT OF RESEARCH COMMISSIONED BY THE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY

*Pam Lowe, Demelza Jones, Karen West & Crispian Fuller,  
Aston University*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. This report sets out findings of a rapid-ethnographic research project commissioned by The Children's Society and conducted by a research team from Aston University into the experiences of families living in Kingshurst – a neighbourhood within the metropolitan borough of Solihull in the West Midlands.
2. Statistics have shown that there are high levels of deprivation in the area; with child poverty ranging from 50% in Babbs Mill North to 16% in Babbs Mill South. This variation hides the different socio-economic position and mixed needs of local residents.
3. The project consisted of the production of an evidence summary, and interviews and observations with professionals and families living in the area. We spent time at sessions for pre-school children, attended local schools, and went to a range of organised children's activities and other community activities.
4. There were two main limitations to the fieldwork. First, there were a number of other research activities ongoing in the area that had a significant impact on recruitment and limited what some informants shared with us. The second limitation was that we would have preferred to have had more contact with young people.
5. We found that there were three different groups of families living in the area. Each of the family groups represents different geographical and social network relationships:
  - *Established families*: Families with strong roots in the area
  - *Settled families*: Families who chose to live in Kingshurst, but plan to move on
  - *Transitory families*: Newly arrived families who have few local connections

Each of these groups have different needs in terms of local services, and it is unlikely that a single strategy will be able to meet their diverse needs.

6. Stigma is a significant issue for people living in the area. Many families reported incidents when they were judged or patronised rather than supported by local services or professionals, and disliked high levels of surveillance over family life. Reducing the stigmatisation of families is essential if trust of service providers is to be increased.
7. The majority of issues for Established and Settled families are structural in origin. They have need of better housing and decent jobs, but are well equipped to make full use of the resources they have access to in order to help their children reach their full

potential. Transitory families would benefit from more community support providing it was available in a non-stigmatising manner.

8. There were marked difference between professionals and families in relation to children's futures. Some professionals believed that many families in the area lacked aspirations for their children. In contrast, many families believed it was the low expectations of educational professionals that was an issue, whilst they stressed the importance of education in securing a future for their children.
9. For Established families, local ties were often strong and members of these family and friendship networks provided both practical and emotional support to one another. Settled families tended to have less strong ties to the area, and whilst some made local friends, others tended to have their primary affiliations outside of the area. Transitory families are more likely to have arrived in a crisis situation, and may need the most assistance in finding new friends and social networks.
10. The majority of Established and Settled informants we spoke to were clearly embedded within social networks for mutual assistance, whether local or more distant. This was a significant resource for many families coping with adversity, although for some families, obligations to friends and family can be a threat to precariously balanced lives. Local services that limit access by postcode can disrupt local social networks. Some families choose not to use services as all if they cannot attend with family and friends.
11. Low income is a significant issue, with some families struggling to provide essentials. Low incomes also impact upon the viability of local voluntary groups with some organisations having to cease activities and others dependent on charitable grants to keep going. There is a local credit union, but many families are still borrowing from high cost lenders such as Bright House. Some local service providers did not seem to know about the credit union and so promoting this more would be helpful.
12. Although unemployment is a significant issue, most people have worked or are motivated to work. Low pay and childcare issues appeared to be the most important barriers to finding work. Under-employment appeared to be a significant issue for many families. This could involve not being able to find work in line with qualifications, or being employed on part-time hours when full-time work was wanted.
13. It is generally recognised that the current stock of social housing in North Solihull is inadequate in meeting the needs and desires of families. Many families live in overcrowded or poor quality housing, and the demand for houses with gardens is unlikely to be met anytime soon. Most families, and many professionals, believe that

unsuitable housing is having a significant detrimental impact on children's development. The situation has been exacerbated by recent changes in government housing policy.

14. Racism and racialised tensions over resource allocation are significant issues in this area. Many local families believe they are unfairly treated while immigrant families receive preferential treatment, particularly in relation to housing, although there is no evidence that this is actually the case. Imminent changes to Solihull Housing Association waiting list policy may help alleviate these tensions.
15. Parks and green spaces were frequently identified by children as the 'best thing' about living in Kingshurst, although there were also many concerns raised about the safety and suitability of play areas. Broken play equipment, littering and dog fouling, anti-social behaviour and the lack of public toilets were all named as significant issues. Investment in play spaces was seen as important – particularly by the many families in the area who do not have access to a garden.
16. There are a range of services for pre-school children and many activities for primary age, although sometimes families cannot access these for financial reasons. More investment in services for young people, and assistance in increasing the capacity of local organisations offering services for children with disabilities and additional needs would benefit the community.
17. Many families were concerned about crime and anti-social behaviour. Young people were often held responsible, although many people believed that this was because of a lack of things for young people to do. Young people were victims of crime, and the threat of crime appeared to have a significant impact on the lives of some young people in the area.
18. Many residents felt let down by a lack of investment in the area, symbolised by the run-down appearance of Kingshurst Parade. Whilst there had been some improvement in the GP practice recently, generally the local health services were seen as extremely poor. Access to services for children with disabilities and additional needs was seen as largely inadequate, with long waits for assessment, diagnosis and treatment which negatively impacted on these children's futures.
19. There is a strong network of local organisations and key professionals from statutory agencies providing services in the area, although this does not include all of those working in the area. Building on this local expertise would be useful for the development of the Children and Family Zone. To date, many organisations in the local network had been approached about the Children and Family Zone but most of the

organisations we spoke to reported that they had not yet experienced a meaningful consultation and they felt that their reservations had not been listened to.

20. The concept of a Children and Family Zone involves joining up local services. However as families already have serious concerns about issues of stigma and high levels of surveillance this carries a significant risk of increasing this problem. Unless handled extremely sensitively, families may disengage with services that they believe are part of a network.
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## INTRODUCTION

This report sets out findings of research commissioned by The Children’s Society and conducted by a research team from Aston University into the experiences of families living in Kingshurst – a neighbourhood within the metropolitan borough of Solihull in the West Midlands.

The report begins by introducing the research – its aims, parameters and methodology. We then present findings from the research, starting with three vignettes which introduce some of the key issues facing families in Kingshurst, and how these issues may impact on different types of families in different ways. These issues are subsequently explored through a detailed account of the findings of fieldwork conducted amongst local families and professionals working in the area. The findings are organised into four thematic areas:

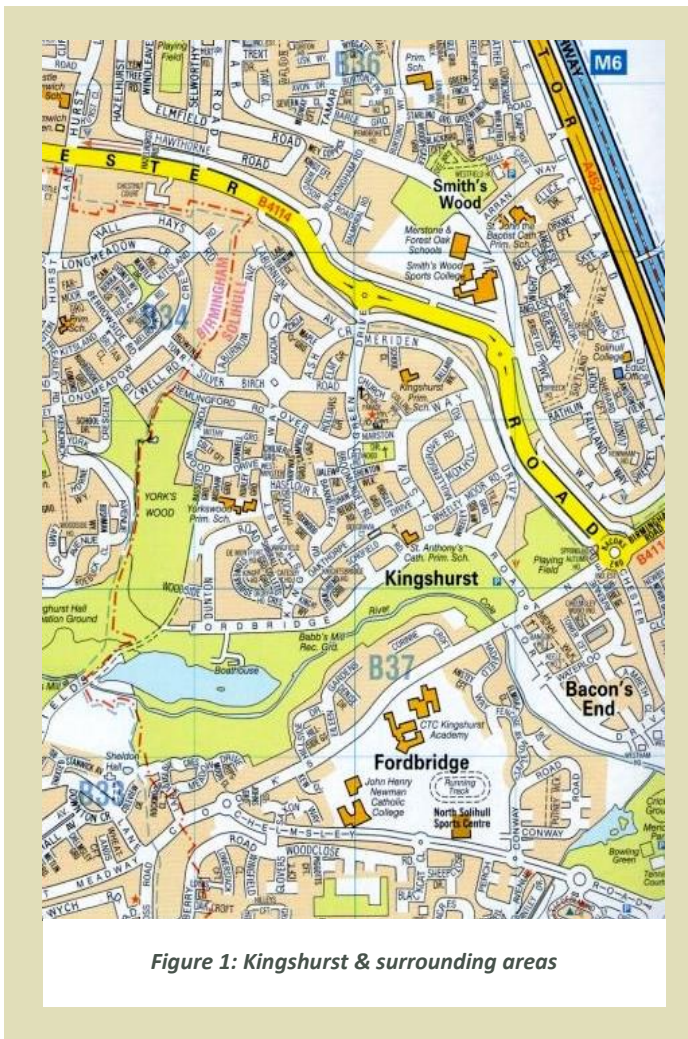
- Money and work
- Community and relationships
- The local environment
- Services and amenities

The report concludes with a summary of the key findings emerging from the research, and, based on these findings, provides some recommendations for the future development of Kingshurst and its community.

## THE RESEARCH

### BACKGROUND

This project was funded by The Children's Society, who commissioned a research team from Aston University to carry out a rapid-ethnographic investigation into issues for families who live in North Solihull.



In the original tender documents, the geographic area was to cover three specific wards; Kingshurst and Fordbridge, Smith's Wood and Chelmsley Wood, but this was narrowed to focus more closely on Kingshurst and the immediate surrounding areas by the funders.

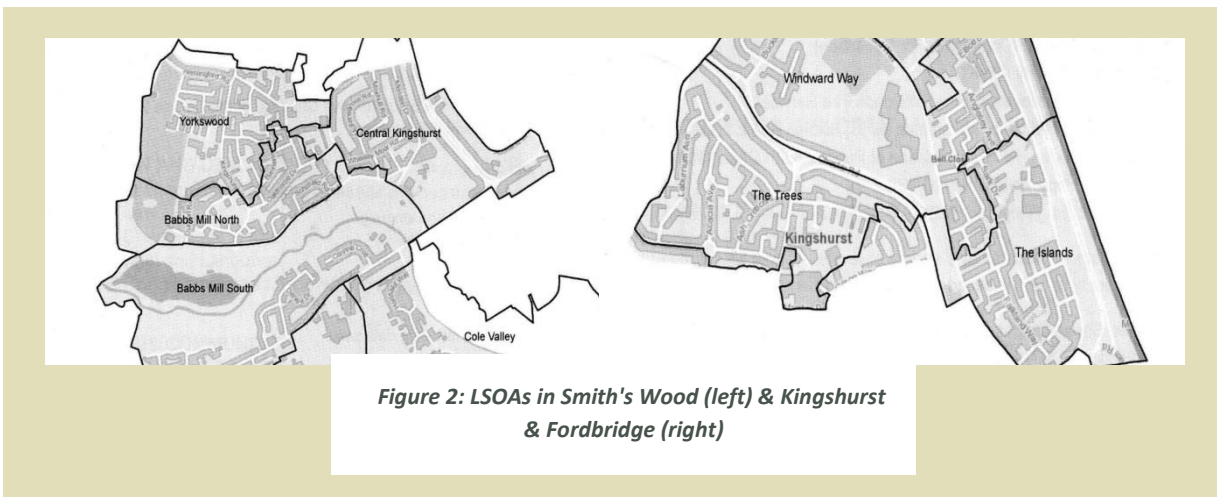
Kingshurst is situated within the Kingshurst and Fordbridge ward. In local geography, Kingshurst is bounded by the Chester Road from the north to east and by Babbs Mill nature reserve from the south to the west. Fordbridge and Chelmsley Wood are to the south, whereas Smith's Wood is north-east and Castle Bromwich north. Part of the locally defined Kingshurst area, The Trees, is situated administratively within Smith's Wood ward. Smith's Wood has a similar demographic profile to Kingshurst and Fordbridge.

Both Kingshurst and Fordbridge and Smith's Wood wards are urban areas which are more densely populated than the average for Solihull, and have higher numbers of children and young people (0-15) and young adults (16-29).<sup>1</sup> The areas have seen a significant increase of residents from Black and minority ethnic communities, although the majority of the

<sup>1</sup> All statistics used in this document are from the Ward Profile produced by the Solihull Observatory (2013) unless otherwise stated.

population is still of white ethnic origin (91%). The areas have a higher proportion of Black residents than Solihull generally, but a lower proportion of Asian residents.

The Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) do not have exactly the same boundaries as the ward or local understandings of geography. However four LSOAs; Central Kingshurst, Yorkswood, The Trees and Babbs Mill North make up the majority of Kingshurst as it is locally defined. This project also covered part of The Islands LSOA situated in Smith's Wood, and Babbs Mill South which is administratively in Fordbridge, but locally mainly seen as Chelmsley Wood.



According to the Multiple Index of Deprivation, the LSOAs of Babbs Mill North, Yorkswood and The Islands are all in the bottom 10% for deprivation nationally. The Trees is in the bottom 20% nationally, whereas Central Kingshurst and Babbs Mill South are some of the least deprived neighbourhoods in North Solihull. Of the economically active population, the area has an employment rate of 66%. However there has been a decline in full-time jobs and a rise in part-time employment. One in three adults in the area has no formal qualifications.

Large numbers of children in the target area of the research are deemed to be living in poverty. The highest rate is in Babbs Mill North where 50% of children are living in poverty. Rates for the other areas are: Yorkswood - 46%, The Islands and The Trees - 37%, Central Kingshurst - 24% and Babbs Mill South - 16%. This is in comparison to the average for Solihull as a whole which is 16% and the average for England at 23%.

Whilst the Solihull average for socially rented housing is 15%, in Kingshurst and Fordbridge it is 41% and in Smith's Wood 43%. Owner occupation is at about 50% in the area, compared to 75% in Solihull generally and the national average of 64%. Owner occupation rates are highest in Babbs Mill South (80%), Central Kingshurst (74%) and The Trees (55%). Rates of social rented housing are highest in The Islands (58%) and Babbs Mill North (56%). Yorkswood is unusual in that the highest proportion of people are living in privately rented

homes (51%). A significant proportion of residents in Solihull are classed as in housing need by the Council Allocations Policy. We were told that currently across the borough of Solihull there were 19,500 people on the housing waiting list, although the rules for the waiting list were due to change shortly and about half the applicants would no longer qualify. We will give more details on this later in the report.

## PROJECT PLAN AND FIELDWORK

The project was designed to uncover a detailed understanding of the lived experience and context of families living in this disadvantaged community. It sought to explore how the dynamics of the community impacted on families' daily lives, the support that already existed, and the gaps in services that impact on social disadvantage. There were four stages in the research design:

- Stage A: Review of academic literature and development of conceptual framework
- Stage B: Scoping work with fifteen professionals
- Stage C: Case Studies with six families
- Stage D: Ethnographic work with 12 families

Stage A resulted in an evidence summary of relevant academic literature, which is included as an appendix at the back of this report. During Stage B of the project, the research team spent time with 21 professionals from 15 organisations who work in the area or have responsibility for providing services there. Data has been collected through a mixture of formal and informal interviews and observation. The organisations cover a variety of different areas including education, community support and religious organisations. The research covers both public and voluntary organisations. We have spent time at sessions for pre-school children and attended local schools. We also went to a range of organised children's activities and other community activities.

In Stages C and D the focus of the fieldwork moved towards the experiences and viewpoints of local families. The main method of recruitment was through local organisations and services. Flyers were also given out through schools and left in strategic places such as the local café, shops and children's centre. In total, we carried out interviews and ethnographic observations with 13 local families and had informal conversations with an additional 14 families. Where families agreed, we used the 'go-along' method of ethnography,<sup>2</sup> spending time with our informants as they went about their daily business. This included time spent

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<sup>2</sup> Kusenbach M. (2003) 'Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool' *Ethnography* 4(3): 455-485

at local parks, on the school run and attending community events. We used techniques such as 'Draw and Write'<sup>3</sup> in interviews with children, and collected visual data when we were in and around Kingshurst with our informants.

Where permission was granted, interviews and conversations were recorded. In other cases, notes were taken in addition to the observations. In order to protect the identity of informants, all informant names used in this report are pseudonyms. Additionally, some details of the families have been omitted or altered, and we make use of composite narratives where this makes no difference to the analysis of the data.

Our informants included both single parent and two parent households, and informants from white British and Black and Minority-Ethnic groups (BME). Also in our sample were a family with grandparents as the main carers and a foster-carer. Of the families that gave us details, the majority were receiving some form of benefits, with working tax credit and housing benefit being the most prevalent.

Half way through the project, an interim workshop was held, and attendees were given the opportunity to discuss and give their input around four major themes identified in the fieldwork to date. Notes from this event were used to both verify the interim findings and shape the ethnographic stage. The comments and discussion arising from this event have been added into the dataset. Permission was sought from the event participants for this.

All of the audio-recordings from the fieldwork were transcribed and added to the field-notes of informal conversations, observations, visual data and interim workshop comments. The data was thematically analysed using key concepts from the literature, as well as looking for emerging issues.

There were two main limitations to the fieldwork. Firstly, there were a number of other research activities, a consultation about the children's centres and a TV production company filming in the area. This had a significant impact on recruitment in that some people took part in these activities and felt they had nothing else to say to us. It also shaped what some of our informants shared with us as the other research activities framed what they thought we were interested in. The second limitation was that we were unable to access the local youth service. We did recruit young people through other organisations for young people, and some of the families we recruited had older and younger children, but we would have preferred to have had more contact with young people. The data suggests that young people are a group that is currently significantly under-served in terms of services, and some of the difficulty we experienced in recruiting them is because there were very few options to meet with them outside of the family context.

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<sup>3</sup> Horstman M. et al (2008) 'Methodological issues when using the draw and write technique with children aged 6 to 12 years', *Qualitative Health Research* 18(7): 1001-1011.

## FAMILIES IN KINGSHURST: THREE VIGNETTES

Whilst clearly every family is different, our analysis of the data has revealed three main groups of families living in the Kingshurst area. These family groups represent different geographical and social network relationships.

The three types of family are:

- *Established families:* Families with strong roots in the area
- *Settled families:* Families who chose to live in Kingshurst, but plan to move on
- *Transitory families:* Newly arrived families who have few local connections

Not all families will fully fit into these analytical categories, and some families may move between them. Nevertheless grouping families in this way helps to indicate differing access to resources and services, and highlights how issues impact on groups of families differently.

In the rest of this section we have weaved together issues and experiences of different families we encountered in the course of the fieldwork to provide a composite picture of life in Kingshurst for each of these family types.

### ESTABLISHED FAMILIES

#### THE MILES FAMILY

The Miles family consists of Lesley, a single parent, and her 4 daughters: Gemma (11), Grace (8), Ruby (5), and Eva (2). Like most people in Established families, Lesley grew up in the area, as did her ex-partner, and they have a strong network of family and friends locally. Lesley attended college after school and has a level 3 vocational qualification in childcare, but because she was heavily pregnant with her eldest daughter when she finished college, has never worked in her chosen career. When she was still living with her partner, she worked part-time in retail jobs. Her last job was a temporary Christmas post, but she was not kept on afterwards. She is not currently looking for work because of the cost of childcare, but has started volunteering at a local school now her youngest child has a playgroup place and she has some free time during the day.

Lesley's main income is from benefits and, as her ex-partner is out of work, he does not contribute much financially, although he does see the children most Saturdays. When he was working, he used to help towards the costs of things like school uniform and shoes, and his unemployment has had a negative impact on Lesley's finances. She tries to budget, but when she does occasionally struggle she can usually rely on family to assist her. Lesley spends a lot of time with her family and friends and this is her preferred choice of leisure



activity. She can call on them for assistance with babysitting when she needs it, and she often looks after young relations or her friends' children when they need help.

Lesley and her children live in a 2 bedroom high rise flat which they rent from a housing association. Lesley has been bidding for a house for a while, but so far has not been successful. She desperately wants her children to have a garden to play in. Lesley tries to make sure that the children get outside every day, but sometimes bad weather or a poorly child make this impossible. She spends quite a lot of time with family and friends and prefers this to organised activities. She worries about her older children not having enough space in which to do their school work. It is impossible to provide a quiet study space in the flat because of the lack of physical space and overcrowding, although she does what she can to ensure that the children progress well in school.

Gemma, Grace and Ruby all like living in Kingshurst and they enjoy going to school. They like going to the park, although they prefer Shard End Park to the ones on Kingshurst as they think there is better play equipment. Grace and Ruby like to go fishing at Babbs Mill, but Lesley is a bit wary of going there. She has been told that paedophiles are living in a half-way house near the play equipment so doesn't believe it is a very safe place to take the children.

For established families, such as the Miles family, most of the problems they encounter are structural. They have need of better housing and decent jobs, but are well equipped to make full use of all the resources available to them in order to help the children reach their full potential. They are

*For Established families, most of the problems they encounter are structural*

embedded in networks of family and friends and have reciprocal arrangements to help each other out in times of need. They use or engage with community services when needed but this use is strategic, and whilst they would benefit from improvements such as a better local NHS service or improved local parks, they are already well placed to be active in decision-making and to participate in areas of community or social life when they wish to do so.

## SETTLED FAMILIES

### THE EARLE FAMILY

The Earle family consists of Sue, Steve and their two children Katie (6) and David (2). The Earle family moved to Kingshurst before they had their children. They live in a two bedroom maisonette. They chose Kingshurst because it seemed to be a good place to get on the property ladder when they were looking to buy their first home on a limited budget. Like most Settled families, they always envisaged moving on rather than staying in the area long

term. For Sue and Steve, the financial crash has made moving on impossible at the moment. They originally took out a self-certificate mortgage because Steve is self-employed. With the restriction of mortgage lending and tightening of rules, they now cannot apply for a new mortgage, and they are also currently in negative equity as they bought at the peak of the housing boom.

After they had children, Sue and Steve found that their maisonette was not really suitable for a young family. The access is only by way of stairs which meant that when the children were younger getting a buggy in and out was really difficult. As their children are now older, this is no longer a problem, but they still lack a garden, and feel their children are not getting the childhood they deserve. Sue and Steve worry about their children growing up in Kingshurst. They do not think the primary schools are very good and had tried unsuccessfully to get a school place in Marston Green. They worry that their children will mix with the wrong people when they are older.

*They feel their children  
are not getting the  
childhood they deserve*

Steve works full-time and Sue works part-time to try to make ends meet. Steve's earnings have dropped over the last few years, but they are hopeful that when the economy picks up it will get better. Steve works Monday to Friday during the day and Sue works a couple of evenings a week and at weekends. Whilst this arrangement works well financially as they don't have to pay for childcare, it significantly reduces the time they can spend together as a couple and as a family. They sometimes feel like ships passing in the night.

Sue takes David to local groups for under 5s and looks for local activities for both children during the holiday. She doesn't drive, so during the day she is limited to ones that are easily accessible to her. Whilst there is a frequent bus services through Kingshurst, usually they will be small buses with only two spaces for pushchairs, both of which are often taken. This makes the service unreliable for parents with young children. Sue feels that many of the local services for younger children are aimed at 'problem' families and the sort of activities she would like to attend are not available locally. She would be happy to pay for additional services that better suited her and her family's needs.

Katie enjoys school and her parents are keen for her to do well. She goes to swimming lessons and dance classes but her favourite activity is Girls' Brigade. She also likes riding her bike in the park, and was upset when the bike was stolen from the family's garage. Katie's best friend has been to Disneyland Paris and she would really like to go there too, but this is not something the family are able to afford at the moment.

Settled families such as the Earle family chose to live in Kingshurst, but they always envisage moving on. They tend to be more affluent than many other families in the local area, but can still struggle to provide the lifestyle they want for their families. They worry about raising a family in the area and tend to socialise with other Settled families or with people



outside the area. They have a strong investment in education and seek out activities that they think will enhance their children's development. They use local services strategically, attending when they think it is their best interest and avoiding if they see no benefit or have concerns about others who may be attending. They do not believe that currently local services are targeted at people like them, and would be happy to pay if it would enhance the quality of the provision.

## TRANSITORY FAMILIES

### THE HARDING FAMILY

Jason, Tiffany, Jordon (14), Ashley (8) and Tyler (6) make up the Harding Family. Jordon is Tiffany's son from a previous relationship. They moved to Kingshurst a year ago from East Birmingham, and live in a privately-rented house. Like many transitory families, they arrived in Kingshurst because they had nowhere else to go. In their case, this was because their last landlord gave them notice to quit after they asked for some repairs to be done, and their current house was the only available option apart from declaring themselves homeless. The unexpected move cost them a lot of money, and the delay in getting housing benefit meant they had to use the local food bank just after they arrived.

Jason currently works 16 hours a week for a landscape garden company. He would really like more hours, but that is all he can get. He is a qualified carpenter, but has not been able to find work locally. He was working in London, but found the money he was earning did not cover the costs of commuting. Tiffany is not able to work at the moment as Tyler has a disability and the frequent appointments with health professionals and at school mean that she often needs to be available during the day. They feel that the school are not supporting Tyler fully. They think that the school is blaming them for his problematic behaviour and they are not being listened to.

The move was hard on the whole family, and as they now realise that private landlords can ask for their property back at any time, they still feel unable to really put down roots. They didn't really know anyone when they moved into the area, but have a few friends here now. They still tend to keep themselves to themselves, though, and, consequently, they do not always know what local services are available.

Jordon thinks he will get Bs and Cs in his GCSEs next year. His plan is then to leave school and go to college, although he is not really sure yet what he wants to do. He doesn't worry about that as he thinks there is plenty of time to decide. He doesn't attend any youth organisations but instead hangs out with friends from school. Ashley likes reading best in school. She would like to be able to invite her friend's round to her house to play more, but often this is not possible because of Tyler's sometimes challenging behaviour.

*Transitory families would benefit from more community support, providing it was available in a non-stigmatising manner*

Like many Transitory families, the Hardings have multiple difficulties in their lives. They have often arrived in Kingshurst following a crisis and need more support in finding their feet in the local area. Many Transitory families are living day-to-day and some have multiple services to negotiate with. Transitory families would benefit from more community support, providing it was available in a non-stigmatising manner.

## THEMES EMERGING FROM THE RESEARCH

Having given a snapshot of some of the issues impacting upon families in the local area through the three vignettes, the following sections of the report present the findings of research with families living in Kingshurst and professionals working in the area. As outlined in the report's introduction, the findings are organised into four thematic areas (although there is of course a degree of overlap between some of these areas):

### MONEY AND WORK

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This section of the report looks at the low incomes of many families in the area, and the ways that a low income may impact on family life. It describes how some families struggle to meet basic needs (for example food and clothing), whilst others, although able to provide the essentials, are limited in their ability to provide leisure activities and fun childhood experiences for their children. The section goes on to look at the closely related issue of work, exploring how issues of unemployment or under-employment impact on families in the area, and some of the barriers which may prevent unemployed parents from re-entering the workforce.

### COMMUNITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

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This second section is concerned with the ways that people interact with and perceive others in their local community. It starts by exploring the dense local networks of family and friends that strongly influence life in the area for many Established families, and considers the alternative networks or absence of networks which are experienced by Settled and Transitory families. It then looks at relationships between families and the professionals who run or deliver services in the area, including analysis of the critical issue of stigma. Finally, this section considers some of the tensions between different groups of residents within the area, exploring perceptions of crime and anti-social behaviour (particularly in relation to local young people), and racialised tensions around local resource allocation.

### THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

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This section deals with families' and professionals' experiences of the local built environment. We start by looking at housing, which emerged as a critical local issue as many families are trapped in unsuitable accommodation that does not adequately meet their needs. We move on to look at parks and play areas – a topic that was discussed in both

positive and negative terms by families and professionals – with the area’s relative abundance of green spaces being seen as a local asset which, nonetheless, could be subject to significant improvements. Finally we consider the main shopping area in Kingshurst – the Parade – a geographic focal point for the community which aroused mixed opinions about its best use and potential future development.

## SERVICES AND AMENITIES

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The concluding part of the empirical section of the report looks at the services and amenities currently available in the local area, including health services, schools, and services aimed at children across various age brackets. The data presented here reveals families’ likes and dislikes about these services and amenities, and some of the barriers which may prevent families accessing and using them. Particular consideration is given to families whose child has a disability or additional need, and the specific barriers to services and amenities which these families may face.

### INCOME AND DEBT

Low income is a significant issue for many families in the area. It affects Established, Settled and Transitory families, and both workless and working households. For some families, meeting the costs of essential items was difficult whereas for others a low income meant that their children were unable to participate in local activities. Almost all of our families were claiming some form of benefits, with working tax credits and housing benefit the most common.

### MEETING NEEDS

Professionals told us that lack of money is a significant issue for people living in the area and that the issue is getting worse:

*'In immediate terms, there is a real impact in terms of families being short of money (...) over the past couple of years we've asked whether there are more people in the area struggling to make ends meet, or whether they personally are struggling, and the figure's significantly worse in North Solihull and it's still getting worse'.*

Changes to benefits was one of the main factors that professional identified as having an adverse impact on family finances. One of the local food banks indicated that 48% of referrals to them were due to benefit changes or delays in benefit payments. Other professionals told us that *'the quality of meals'* was an issue and that in some households parents were *'feeding the children and not themselves'*.

Families often described the constant battle to try to keep up with paying for everything that they needed. Amy stated:

*'I do struggle. I try to budget, but when you have got kids it is hard, isn't it'*

*'It is hard with the money he's [partner's] on. I do struggle. I try to budget, but when you have got kids it is hard, isn't it. Bills and stuff, and then trying to keep these [children] happy - to get them out and stuff. And then, shopping and electric and stuff. If they're [clothes] in good wear, if they don't have much wear out of them, they get passed down. We manage'.*

For families who were just 'getting by' in this way, there was little opportunity to save and that meant it could be difficult to cope in emergency situations such as a need to replace

the washing machine. Others did manage to save for bigger items, and spoke of shopping around to try to get things as cheaply as possible.

One of the things that emerged in the fieldwork is that for low income parents, it could be beneficial to have a child protection plan in place. We were told that:

*'I think if you are on a child protection plan and you have Children's Services working with you, you can kind of almost get your hands on anything straight away. Money, furniture, carpets. There is so much help out there if you are on a plan. But if you are not on a plan, there is very limited help you can actually give that family'.*

Doing things as a family or providing activities for children was another expense that many families struggled with. Families who relied on public transport found that taking children outside of the area could be expensive, but that there was a lack of facilities in Kingshurst, particularly for older children.

*You could get a family pass for £8 ['Family Daysaver' bus pass], but that is still a lot of money. And if you were going to the pictures, you would still have to pay to go into the pictures. We'd probably just stay at home and get a DVD or something'*

Whilst many families spoke of the cost of children's activities, families in flats felt particularly pressured to pay for children's activities to make up for a lack of garden space. This need was particularly acute during the long summer holidays. As Judy told us:

*'I've been trying to look for something; somewhere for them to go in the 6 weeks holidays, something for them to do, centres or anything. I don't really know of anything at the minute. I did just hear (...) a play-scheme near Kingshurst Park. But it was £4 something. I doubt that is for the day, I think it is more than that. It's too much'.*

*'I've been trying to look for something; somewhere for them to go in the 6 weeks holidays, something for them to do'*

Many parents also complained about the cost of school uniform and felt that schools were not very understanding about the difficulties some families could face in providing it. Diane told us about a school trip that her son had been on, in which the wearing of school uniform had been compulsory

*'They went to Warwick Castle the other day, the one day it rained. But they had to wear their school uniform still (...) And then they come back and they are covered in mud, and they have rips in their trousers. It would be much better if they could wear their jeans - it wouldn't matter then. Then you have got to go out and replace expensive school uniform. That is not cheap'.*

Many of the professionals also told us about the difficulties that local organisations faced because of the prevalence of low incomes in the area. Some spoke of how not all families could afford to use their services, and sometimes children had to stop attending because the family could no longer afford the place. One local organisation, which had to rely heavily on charitable grant funding to ensure the continuation of its services, described:

*‘Putting the fees up just isn’t an option. The children won’t come and they’ll be the ones to miss out. If you put the fees up people will stop coming. (...) the thing is that there are that many people out there waiting for places that you have to turn to them and say ‘if you can’t pay you can’t come’, but then you think ‘that child needs to come’, so it is really hard’.*

Some organisations reported that they had to cease activities completely, as running the service had become financially unviable through the twin pressures of a lack of families’ ability to pay and cuts from local authorities in response to the austerity programmes of national government.

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## *BORROWING AND DEBT*

Most families need to borrow money at some points in their lives. During the fieldwork, we identified a number of different sources of lending for poorer families in the area. All of them have different implications in terms of financial viability.

One of the main sources of lending for Established families is from family and friends. Where possible, families would help each other out with loans or material goods:

*‘the benefit system, the bedroom tax, it is causing all sorts of problems. My sister is on the, illness one, but they keep stopping her money for no reason. She keeps having to get letters from the doctor, and she does that, but the money still stops. My mum and dad are on a pension and they have to give her food. She can’t pay her rent. She is ill with depression and it is making it worse’.*

Borrowing from family and friends is a low cost option for those who receive the money, but it can put an additional strain on those lending it if they are also on a low income.

The other main source of low cost lending in the area is the local credit union. This is based in the DIAL<sup>4</sup> office on Kingshurst Parade and so is easily accessible to many families. The credit union had originally been based at Seeds of Hope – a community organisation based at St Barnabas Church in the centre of Kingshurst - but moved last year to the DIAL offices.

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<sup>4</sup> DIAL stands for Disability Information and Advice Line – a charity providing advice, support and advocacy for disabled people and carers.

Local awareness of the credit union could be improved, as not all the professionals we spoke to were aware of its existence and were therefore unable to recommend it to the families they worked with.

Many families who need household goods turn to BrightHouse to finance them. BrightHouse describes itself as ‘a weekly payment retailer’. It operates on a ‘rent-to-own’ system which allows its customers to access a range of products and pay them off over time. BrightHouse has been heavily criticised in the media for the excessive prices that it charges for its products and warranties.<sup>5</sup> The nearest BrightHouse to Kingshurst is in Chelmsley Wood, so it is easily accessible to families living in the area. Families that used BrightHouse also found that whilst the initial repayments looked reasonable: *‘if you miss one payment, it rockets’*. This could push families in an already precarious financial position over the edge.

Whilst none of our families mentioned using them, many professionals said that there were issues with borrowing from payday lenders and companies such as Provident Personal Credit. Provident operate through a network of agents that call into people’s houses both to hand out loans and to collect repayments. Other research has found that because of the personal relationship between the agent and borrower, it can lead families into an ongoing borrowing relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Other professionals also mentioned that illegal loan sharks operated in the area. One professional told us that some families find it easier to access illegal loans:

*‘I think it is, from my experience, I think they go for the illegal because it is quicker really. You can literally go to them and they will lend you this, but it is then extortionate interest rate. If they go the legal, and they are not working, it is more hassles really’.*

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## FINANCIAL STABILITY

It was clear from the fieldwork that many families were struggling financially. For some, this struggle was to provide the basic necessities such as food and clothing, whereas for others it was for more optional, but still modest, activities such as family outings to the cinema or for their children to attend local groups and activities. There is little that can be done within the area to increase incomes as they are tied to the availability of well-paid employment (discussed in subsequent sections) and rates of welfare benefits. Reducing the cost of

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Lunn E. (23/11/2012) ‘Brighthouse and the heavy price of paying by the week’, *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/money/2012/nov/23/brighthouse-heavy-price-paying-by-week>

<sup>6</sup> Flaherty J. and Banks S. (2013) ‘In whose interest? The dynamics of debt in poor households’, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*. 21(3): 219-232



borrowing from expensive lenders such as BrightHouse through greater use of the credit union could help alleviate some of the issues.

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## EMPLOYMENT, VOLUNTEERING AND TRAINING

The ward statistics indicate that the rates of unemployment in the area are higher than the average for Solihull, and that young adults are particularly affected. They state that the recent increases to claims for out-of-work benefits in the area have been attributed to changes in benefit policy which have resulted in many claimants no longer qualifying for health-related benefits, and increased requirements for lone parents to look for work. Yet despite this negative picture of worklessness, our findings show that that under-employment and low pay are a bigger issue for many families than unemployment.

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## WORKLESSNESS

In common with other recent research on poor communities in the UK,<sup>7</sup> we could not find families in which a culture of worklessness existed, despite a perception from some families and professionals within and outside the area that this was a serious local problem. Whilst some of our families did not currently have anyone in paid employment, most of them had worked at some point and were planning on working again when they could find employment that was accessible and affordable. Low pay in relation to the cost of childcare was one of the main reasons that many mothers, in both single and two parent households, gave for not currently working:

*'They want you to go back to work when your children are that young. But it is the cost. You are going to work just for someone else to look after your child really. You are just paying all your wages for someone else to look after them. You might as well look after them yourself.'*

*'They want you to go back to work when your children are that young. But it is the cost'*

The cost of childcare was not the only barrier to finding work. Some informants could only find work far away from home, but the cost of travel was prohibitive: *'The only work is in London. So you have to travel and stay away. He [partner] was spending so much working down there, he wasn't making any money and he was missing home.'*

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<sup>7</sup> For example, MacDonald R. et al (2014) "Benefits Street' and the myth of workless communities', *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/1.html>

Like many families, these informants were clear that paid employment could also have a negative impact on family relationships, and if there were little or no financial gains to be made, the cost of paid employment could be too high.

Another significant barrier to work was that the employment on offer may not be compatible with childcare availability. For example, a single mother of a 6 year old was looking for work, but had only found jobs with unsociable hours. She was worried about not taking one of these jobs as she now has a requirement to find work linked to her benefit payments. Yet at the same time she felt that it would be impossible to care properly for her child if she took up any of these vacancies.

Most of our informants with young children who were not working intended to do so when their children got older. Some intended to try to go back into the type of work they had done prior to having children: *'Before the children, I did waitressing. A bit of waitressing and cleaning and that. When they get bigger I will go back to that'*. Others intended to change direction and were planning on entering new professions: *'I do want to go back to work when he is at school. I want to go into teaching or something like that'*.

Some of the professionals told us about the barriers that a few families experienced in getting work. For Transitory families with little in the way of support networks, the practical issues could be particularly difficult:

*'they always want to return to work, but it is 'how do I do it?'*

*'They need a lot of input at the beginning to get them going with CVs, interviews and things, and a lot of guidance to get them on the right path. (...) it is what a lot of our families want. (...) they always want to return*

*to work, but it is how do I do it? I have a child, I have no support. The motivation is there, (...) There used to be a lot more courses in the community, but due to financial reasons that has been withdrawn as well. (...) They need to get those skills under their belt again'.*

As the above quotation indicates, cuts to adult education could make gaining these skills harder for families, particularly as the nature of work has changed over time. The types of employment on offer now do not necessarily match the skills of a few of the local residents. As one professional stated: *'Often these are people with poor literacy and numeracy who 20 years ago would have worked in factories sweeping floors etc. (...) where do they go now?'*

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## UNDER-EMPLOYMENT

Issues around under-employment featured heavily in the accounts of the families that we spoke to. Under-employment could happen in two distinctive ways. For some, it was being

unable to find work in line with their qualifications, whereas for others it was only being able to find part-time rather than full-time work. Tracey for example, had been to college and had gained qualifications, but had not yet been able to find a job where she could use them. She told us:

*'I qualified level 3 in childcare. And I have been trying to get a job in a childcare setting, but they want people with experience. So that don't help. I do volunteering, and I have just volunteered in the school'.*

She had worked in other sectors, and was hoping that after a period of voluntary work, she would get access to her chosen career.

Michael, one of the fathers in a Settled family we spoke to had a degree-level education, but he was currently employed in an unskilled position. Whilst he would have preferred to be working in a job that he could utilise his skills and experience, the job he currently had paid more than entry level graduate jobs in his area of specialism. With a young family to support, he felt he had little option but to remain in his current position. The family did not have long term plans to stay in the area, and this was also influencing his decisions about current employment as the family were saving up in order to buy a house in a nearby area with higher property prices.

Some of our other families could only find part-time work rather than full-time positions. This reflects the national situation in that part-time employment rather than unemployment was one of the major impacts of the recent recession.<sup>8</sup> This had a significant impact on residents of Kingshurst. As we were told by a parent of grown-up children:

*'there isn't the work. And now, it is all part-time work. You don't often hear of full time jobs now. (...) she [daughter] is 18. She only does a part-time job because she can't get a full-time job. And I spoke to a lady who has 2 jobs - 2 part-time jobs. She said she needs them to keep the family going'.*

*'You don't often hear of full time jobs now... She [daughter] only does a part-time job because she can't get a full-time job'*

In addition to part-time work, a few families had experienced being in and out of work through the use of temporary contracts. We were told, for example, about getting work in the retail sector over Christmas, but these posts did not always lead to ongoing employment.

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<sup>8</sup> Bell D. and Blanchflower D. (2011) 'Underemployment in the UK in the great recession', *National Institute Economic Review* 215: R23

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## PAID EMPLOYMENT

The majority of two parent households we spoke to had at least one person in work, and in some families, both parents were working. The types of employment these families were engaged in covered different occupations and level of pay. Some families on lower wages did not feel that they benefited much financially from working and that there was a lack of support for working parents. As detailed earlier in this report, low pay, and subsequently a low family income, was a significant issue for many families, and although they were in receipt of tax credits, for many, work did not really leave them better off.

Many families relied on informal rather than paid-for childcare in order to make it financially viable to work. For example in the Howard family, John worked full-time, Cath worked part-time, and Cath's mum helped at times they were both at work: *'My mum is my babysitter when I work. She picks up from school.(...) I work till 6.30 and my mum babysits till 4.30 when my partner comes in'*. This type of arrangement was the most common form of childcare in Established families.

Settled families were much less likely to use informal childcare networks. In some two-parent households that meant that parents would be working at different times: *'I work opposite shifts to my husband. (...) so I work when he's home and vice versa'*. Whilst this type of work pattern may be beneficial financially by saving on childcare costs, it could also have a detrimental impact on family life, with partners being unable to spend much time with each other, or as a whole family.

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## TRAINING AND VOLUNTEERING

Most of the Established families we spoke to had a good understanding of what opportunities there were for gaining additional work skills, and many of those who felt they could be helpful had undertaken them, while others were planning to do so in the future. Taking maths and English qualifications was seen as beneficial both in terms of future job prospects as well as being able to assist their children:

*'I'm starting to do my maths and my English again. It is for me, but more for them- so I can help them with homework and stuff'*

*'I'm starting to do my maths and my English again. It is for me, but more for them- so I can help them with homework and stuff. It was so different when I was at school. (...) It was a bit hard the first couple of weeks getting into it, but I like it. And I'm going to start looking for a job soon, so it will help'*

Whilst some parents were updating basic qualifications, others were undertaking higher level ones. The local branch of Solihull College offers a number of Access to Higher Education courses and members of some families had taken up this opportunity, or were planning to do so over the next couple of years.

Some organisations working in the local area took on volunteers and this also had given some Established families routes into training and paid employment:

*‘One of my members of staff was a mum who came in voluntarily. She has loved it that much that she has done her level two and is thinking of doing her level three. But that’s how we get our staff (...) and other mums who have come in to help have found that they like this as a job and have gone out and got their training’.*

However, more stringent legal requirements around volunteer or staff training, and the recent squeeze in voluntary sector spending meant that some local organisations that relied on local authority or charitable grant funding were unable to provide as many voluntary or training opportunities as they would like, as they simply did not have the budget to do so.

In general, Settled families were less likely to take up local training opportunities. They tended to have higher levels of educational qualifications than Established and Transitory families and indicated that many of the courses on offer were unnecessary for them. In some cases, they were disappointed that play opportunities for pre-school children were linked to low-level training courses as they felt this restricted what their children could access locally:

*‘They want you to put your children into a crèche and want you to do courses. I don’t need to do courses on anything. I want my kids to play’*

*‘They want you to put your children into a crèche and want you to do courses. I don’t need to do courses on anything. I want my kids to play. My kids take ages to settle into places. They are not going to be alright going there for one day, and be all right while I do a course on literacy or whatever, that I don’t need to do. And they push that on you I think. I just want them to go to a centre and play’.*

This is another example of the clash between universal and targeted services. Providing opportunities for training is an important service, but ideally it should not lead to a restriction of services for people that do not want or need this additional help.

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## COMMUNITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

### FRIENDS, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Throughout the research, the majority of informants spoke about strong networks of family and friends. This was reflected in the family accounts of day-to-day living, and was also recognised by many of the professionals who worked with families. Many of the families have significant networks both within Kingshurst, and across North Solihull and East Birmingham more generally.

#### ESTABLISHED COMMUNITY TIES

For Established families, local ties were often strong, and networks of locally-based family and friends provided both practical and emotional support to one another. Families depended on each other to help with childcare, to borrow and lend items in times of need, and generally assist each other in daily life. As Dawn said:

*'[I have] lots of family round here. My Mum and Dad are about 15 minutes walking and my sister and my niece live up the road. My [adult] daughter is in Birmingham, but it is only just over the way - a few minutes' walk. If anyone needs anything, we are always there for each other.*

*[Relative name] has got cancer, and all the friends and family pull around. I can't pick the children up as it is a different school, but my friend goes to that school so she will get them'.*

*'If anyone needs anything,  
we are always there for  
each other'*

As illustrated in the above account, these networks of mutual support also often included non-family members, as close friends would help each other out and provide support for some of the more vulnerable members of the community. Many informants reported that there was *'a nice feeling of community around here'* and it was noticeable to the researchers engaged in 'go-along' work that these residents would meet people they knew frequently when walking around the Kingshurst area.

Our informants recognised that their needs for community support change over time. Parents with younger children appreciated close neighbours so that the children could play in and around their area safely, and that networks for babysitting for work or other reasons could be established. As children got older, the needs changed and they also might spend less time in the community if they started work or increased their hours:

*‘When I was on a lesser wage than I am now, I was like, I needed support financially. I was working part-time, my children were younger. So I did have more of a community based society. [...] My friends and neighbours seem to live in each other’s pockets. Now I work full-time and my children are more grown up [...] I don’t need people as much. That sounds awful [...] but you know what I mean’.*

Professionals told us that data gathered in the local authority’s Place Survey supports this impression of strong networks of mutual support amongst family and friends in the community. The findings of the Place Survey suggest that rates of informal volunteering, such as helping out friends and family, were high in the area and that there was a strong sense of community spirit. However, a number of informants complained about local services in which access was limited by postcode. For example we were told that: *‘Chelmsley Wood [children’s centre] has got a ball pit and a good drinks area and things but we’re not allowed to access that’.* Such limitations on access to services were found to be disruptive to local social networks as families and friends who might live in different postcode areas could not attend together, as they would prefer. Informants often decided not to participate at all if family or friends would not be allowed to attend. This also had a negative impact on general perceptions of these services.

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## MOVING INTO THE COMMUNITY

Settled families tended to have less strong ties to the area. They may not have known anyone on arrival and it can take time to make friends in the community. Some did find people that they wanted to socialise with locally but others tended to have their primary affiliations outside of the area. As Geraldine explained:

*‘We pretty much keep ourselves to ourselves. We’ve always said if we could pick our property up and put it somewhere else [...] My friends are mainly people from work. I work at [name] so they tend to come from Sutton and that side of town rather than nearer here. And obviously my husband’s from [southern English city] so mostly his friends are down that way’*

*‘We pretty much keep ourselves to ourselves’*

The divide between Established and Settled families is not static, and if they stay in the area a while, and have a desire to make friends, Settled families can be drawn into the community networks of Established families.

*‘I have a few friends here [...] [name] is like my mum. She is older than me [...] when I have too much stress with the children I go to her and we drink tea and chat. Then when I go home I feel fine’.*

Local services for families, such as children’s centres, playgroups and schools can be an important way of connecting people, allowing new families to interact and make friends if that is what they wish to do.

As Transitory families are often less affluent than Settled families and may have arrived in a crisis situation, they may initially struggle to make links with others in the community. Transitory families may need the most assistance in finding new friends and social networks. Professionals told us that The Trees area in Kingshurst was often an area that families were resettled after homelessness or other crisis issues, so it might be appropriate to consider what extra support could be developed in this area in particular.

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### POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Whilst networks of friends, family and community ties can be a significant resource for families, they can also have a potential negative impact. Some families can be overwhelmed by obligations, especially if they have little spare capacity themselves. A good example of this is the need for non-working grandparents to provide childcare. As highlighted earlier in the report, for many families paid employment is only accessible if childcare is readily

*‘families getting together and sharing is good, but when they are forced due to circumstances, this shouldn’t be the case’*

available and at little or no cost. Whilst many grandparents are happy and able to look after their grandchildren, for some this can be problematic. As we were told: *‘Childcare is expensive, (...) there is a lot of dependency on grandparents of the children. (...) Ordinarily, families getting together and sharing is good, but when they are forced due to circumstances, this shouldn’t be the case’.*

Fall outs within close families can also be a problem when people live within the local area and are likely to run into each other when using shops or services. Ongoing family arguments can play an important role in making significant decisions. One mother mentioned that she needed to make sure that her daughter did not attend the same school as some of their relatives, as she did not want her *‘to be in the wrong atmosphere’* at school.

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### COMMUNITY SUPPORT NEEDS

Overall the majority of informants we spoke to were clearly embedded within social networks for mutual assistance. This was a significant resource for many families coping with adversity. For Established families, these networks tended to be local. It was these ties that made people feel attached to the area and to perceive it as a good place to live and



raise a family. Settled families were much less attached to Kingshurst or North Solihull and their social networks tended to be spread over a wider geographic area, or concentrated in a different part of the region or country all together. Transitory families, particularly when newly arrived, may be much more isolated, and signposting to places where they can make local connections was particularly useful.

Local services can be useful places for these local connections to be made, but rules and restrictions around access (for example, on the basis of postcode) can also be disruptive of local ties and this can give families a negative perception of service providers. It must also be remembered that for some families, obligations to friends and family can be a threat to precariously balanced lives, and thus can undermine rather than support family networks. In particular, dependency on informal childcare provided by some grandparents was identified as an area of difficulty. However this is unlikely to be able to be addressed without a significant rise in earnings from employment which would enable access to paid childcare.

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## RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROFESSIONALS AND STIGMA

Stigma is a significant issue for people living in the area, and emerged strongly in families' accounts of their relationships with some services and the professionals attached to these services. There are different types of stigma and it is helpful here to distinguish enacted-stigma and felt-stigma.<sup>9</sup> Enacted-stigma is when people experience overt discrimination on the basis of some form of prejudice. It is when people experience stigma in their everyday lives. In contrast, felt-stigma is the concern, fear or even sense of shame that people live with when they believe that a stereotype or something about them could lead others to enact stigma against them. Often people who experience felt-stigma will seek to hide or distance themselves from potentially discrediting characteristics that they believe could be stigmatizing. This can be done through a process of 'othering'; seeing themselves as distinct from, and usually better than, other people who have even less desirable characteristics. We found examples of enacted-stigma, felt-stigma and othering to be a significant issue for people living in the area.

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## EXPERIENCES OF ENACTED-STIGMA

Many of the informants, both professional and families, felt that there was a stigma to living in the area, with North Solihull perceived as less good than South Solihull. Kingshurst was

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<sup>9</sup> Scambler, G. (2004) 'Re-framing stigma: Felt and enacted stigma and challenges to the sociology of chronic and disabling conditions', *Social Theory and Health*, 2: 29-46

deemed to be more stigmatised than other areas and to have been ‘let down’ in comparison even to other parts of North Solihull. We will give more details on this later in the report.

Many families described incidents to us when they had been judged rather than supported by some professionals and organisations. They believed negative opinions were formed on their ability to parent on the basis of where they lived. Two families described being reported to social services when there were no child protection issues. They stated that if the organisations had bothered to discuss the matter with them as parents first, they would have known this was the case. Maria said:

*‘I felt they could have spoken to me about that rather than phone social services’*

*‘They phoned social services because I have [disability] and they wanted a social services assessment. And I felt they could have spoken to me about that rather than phone social services. (...) I wasn’t asked anything about my support structure, family or team. (...) I had just moved house and I had social services knocking on my door to see if I was a fit mum, (...) I don’t think that would happen if I lived in South Solihull. It was just an assumption about parents in the area’.*

We heard concerns that registration forms for some services required a description of parents’ appearance, which had damaged trust as some parents subsequently felt that this service was a ‘front’ for social services. At a family community event we attended in the area, it appeared to some families that giving contact details for parents and information about their children (such as date of birth) to a local support organisation was a condition of entry to the event. Some of the families attending were troubled by this as it is very unusual for events like fetes to ask for such details. Incidents like this added to the families’ sense that they were subjected to surveillance as a discredited community. In addition, some families did not seem sure what the information being collected was going to be used for, which raises concerns about compliance with data protection legislation.

We also heard many stories about parents being patronised when they had asked questions or sought support for their children. A typical example is from Ruth, when she went into school for some guidance on her child’s homework:

*‘I actually approached the teacher and said I couldn’t do it. And she basically looked at me as if I was thick. And she got a copy of the homework sheet she had given [her child] and wrote them [the answers] down then and there. But I wanted her to give me an explanation (...) I mean how am I meant to explain it to my kid if she gets stuck’.*

Families who attended the interim workshop confirmed that they had had similar experiences, and during the fieldwork with professionals and organisations we occasionally heard some negative comments which, if they had been heard by families, would have likely been experienced as enacted-stigma. Within the close social networks of Established

families, news of negative experiences spread quickly and impacted on the way that families made decisions about specific services and organisations. Trust seemed to be destroyed more quickly than it could be established.

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## ISSUES OF FELT-STIGMA

Given the many accounts of enacted-stigma that families or their social networks had experienced, it is not surprising that felt-stigma was a significant issue for many families in the area. Many professionals reported that felt-stigma was a barrier to accessing some services. For example a professional told us that some families in need had refused vouchers for the food bank:

*‘When I have mentioned food bank vouchers, three families have refused, even though they needed it. (...) one family actually said “no, I’m not on ‘Benefits Street’,<sup>10</sup> I’m not having one of them”’*

Other services also reported that families could be reluctant to use them, and that the recent shift in policy from universal usage to services targeted at specific families was having a negative impact. We were told: *‘you get a stigma attached to the children’s centres being only there for children in need’.*

Felt-stigma was also reported to be having a negative impact on young people in the area. Some professionals reported that young people recognised that the area was looked down on, that young people were not expected to achieve anything, and no one was going to support them. One professional stated: *‘I have heard young people say (...) nobody wants us, so we have to get on with life in a jungle as it were’.*

Many residents challenged the image that they believed people had about families living in the area. They wanted to point out the stereotypes were largely unfounded:

*‘People judge you on that, and not on what your kids are really like’*

*‘I think there are one or two troubled families that have never worked. But that is about it. But you don’t really know everyone’s situation. (...) We don’t have any trouble. I mean, the kids round here don’t seem any different to anyone else’s kids. I mean, people say about single parent families, but I have been there and I know what it is like. People judge you on that, and not on what your kids are really like’.*

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Benefits Street’ was a documentary aired in January 2014 on Channel 4 which allegedly showed the lives of people in a disadvantaged community. It was highly controversial and many of the claims made were disputed.

Whilst many of the families experienced felt-stigma, some of the Settled families were the keenest to distance themselves from some of the negative stereotypes about families living in the area.

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### *DISTANCING THE STIGMA THROUGH OTHERING*

The strong awareness of negative stereotyping of families living in the area meant that many informants wanted to indicate to the research team that they were 'better' than this undesirable image. In general, many of the families were keen to describe how important it was for their children to be brought up properly and not mix with children who were 'dragged up' rather than brought up:

*'the children around here end up in a cycle of being with the job centre. That's not a nice thing to say because I was on benefits in the first place. But it's how you bring them up isn't it? (...) He's [son's] grown up with respect (...) When my boy goes to senior school I don't want him to be mixing with those sorts of people because they will bring his aspirations down. We would try to get him into the other school, purely because they have better prospects afterwards'.*

*'When my boy goes to senior school I don't want him to be mixing with those sorts of people because they will bring his aspirations down'*

By creating a distance between themselves and a less desirable other, these informants sought to minimise potentially discrediting characteristics (such as being on benefits), and focus on positive ones (like good parenting).

The need to create distance between themselves and a more discredited other had an impact on the way that families understood services. Settled families in particular felt that the predominant focus of services on poorer sections of the community left them underserved as they *'don't fall into any category'*. Whilst they stated that they understood how other families might need extra support, they felt they were not really catered for in existing services.

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### *THE IMPACT OF STIGMA*

Experiences of enacted and felt-stigma had a significant impact on the relationships between local families and services and organisations. The decline in universal services, coupled with rising stigma around issues such as unemployment and 'benefit scroungers' in society more generally means that contact with support organisations can be seen as a

discrediting action. This is despite good evidence that it is a myth that cultures of worklessness within areas or across generations really exist.<sup>11</sup>

Stigma has led to a lack of trust in many services, and concerns over unwarranted surveillance. Many professionals reported that it took a long time to get families to ‘open up’ to them and that some families ‘will only give you the minimum of information’. Some services took care to point out the distance between themselves and other services in order to build trust. For example we were told: ‘quite often there’s a stigma attached to Children’s Services so we really have to promote our neutrality in that we’re not part of that service’.

Consequently, unless handled extremely sensitively, any move toward more joined-up working between organisations as envisaged within the concept of a Children and Family Zones could mean that families stop engaging with some or all services.

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## CRIME AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

We heard many complaints from local families about crime and anti-social behaviour in Kingshurst. But while some people felt that crime was unusually high, other people thought that the levels were probably comparable to those in other local areas.

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### TYPES OF CRIME AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN KINGSHURST

Families told us that there were a lot of burglaries in the area, with theft of bikes, scooters and motorbikes a particular issue.

One Settled family of owner-occupiers who live in the centre of Kingshurst, told us that the garage attached to their property had been broken into so many times that they could no longer use it, as they could not afford to repeatedly replace the doors. The family described how the location of their home in a cul-de-sac with a walk through to another block of maisonettes left them vulnerable as the perpetrators could make an easy getaway. While they did not feel physically threatened – *‘it’s the kind of crime that’s done at night-time, so during the day it doesn’t really bother me.*

*‘It’s not so much feeling unsafe as feeling frustrated that this is my property and I’ve paid for this, but you feel that you can take it or damage it’*

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<sup>11</sup> MacDonald R. et al (2014) ‘Benefits Street’ and the myth of workless communities’, *Sociological Research Online*, 19(3): <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/1.html>

*You don't feel uncomfortable' – the repeated targeting of their property by thieves made them understandably angry, and compounded their desire to move out of the area as soon as they could afford to do so: 'it's not so much feeling unsafe as feeling frustrated that this is my property and I've paid for this, but you feel that you can take it or damage it'.*

Other families directed us to a Facebook page for the area – 'Kingshurst Spotted' – where residents can post anonymously about local news. Many of these posts describe house burglaries, vandalism of cars and property, theft and joyriding of motorbikes, and fly-tipping, although there are also posts reporting the theft of dogs from gardens and an alleged attempt by a group of men to lure girls into a car.

Although most references to crime in the area were concerned with burglary or vandalism, we did hear some reports of violent crime such as street robberies. Arran Way in Smith's Wood was identified by some families as a 'hotspot' for crime of this kind. For example, in this discussion with three local parents, Lauren, Heather and Chloe:

*Chloe: 'My brother got beat up'*

*Heather: 'And my brother. Last year. They robbed him. They beat him up because he wouldn't give his phone over to them. But we took them to court, and he got justice'.*

*Chloe: 'It used to be nice. I grew up on Arran Way. It used to be alright there. But since we moved out of the area [to central Kingshurst] it has changed so much - since they built the new houses...'*

*Lauren: 'It's a different world'*

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## YOUNG PEOPLE AS PERPETRATORS AND VICTIMS OF CRIME

Young people were blamed for much of the crime and anti-social behaviour in the area. A common complaint amongst adult residents was that groups of young people hang around the area and are perceived as intimidating. As one parent of young children explained: *'the*

*'The worst thing is the youth of a night time... It's just the way they stand around and make you feel awkward'*

*worst thing is the youth of a night time. There is a lot of youth hanging around places (...) mainly by the shopping area (...) It's just the way they stand around, and make you feel awkward'.* Another parent added: *'It is the graffiti and abuse, the language they use - swearing round little ones'.* However, other families we spoke to downplayed the threat posed by these young people: *'it's kids just loitering really. They are*

*not much trouble really - just hanging about*'. Another common complaint against young people was that they vandalised play equipment in local parks. This will be discussed in more detail in the section of the report on parks and play areas.

The local police informed us that the most common crimes perpetrated by children and young people in the area are forms of criminal damage to vehicles and properties. This was confirmed by several families who told us that their cars had been vandalised 'by kids'. A police sergeant told us that the age of children committing these offences ranges from 8 to 15, with the average age between 10 and 12. He felt that criminal activity at this young age was not particularly unusual in an area of high deprivation. Families told us that young people riding motorbikes through the streets at high speed late at night and setting off car alarms was another issue.

Whilst young people are labelled as the perpetrators of crime and anti-social behaviour in the area, they are also victims of crime. This threat appeared to have a significant impact on the lives of some young people in the area; affecting where they could go and what they could do locally. A professional who works with young people in Kingshurst described how:

*'a lot of young people now are scared to go out because of street mugging. There seems to be a lot more of that, where they are getting mugged for their phones, so they fear for their personal safety. A lot of young people have got fear of being on the streets - of being attacked. Not just that they are asking them for things, but they are using knives and threatening with weapons'*.

*'A lot of young people have got fear of being on the streets - of being attacked'*

Discussions with families revealed that this also impacted upon younger teenagers and children. Lauren recounted a recent incident involving her 13 year old son:

*'The other Friday he wanted to go up to his granddad's on his scooter. My concept is, if anybody steals it, you are going to be upset. It was expensive to buy. He was only going to collect a ream of paper. I could have gone in the car, but the little ones were asleep, and he was adamant 'I'll go'. I text my dad, 'he is on his way'. My dad text me 'he's here'. And then dad will text me 'he is coming back'. So I was like 'ok'. He walked through the door, full of blood. I was like 'what an earth has happened?' Some kid had gestured to punch him; he had swerved on his scooter and gone into a hedge. Mud. Blood. Scraped all his ribs. I said 'this is why I won't let you out - you're lucky you still have your phone and your scooter'...*

*... He is 13, and he doesn't go out and play and stuff. And I was like 'why did you go? You could have waited for that paper'. I was really angry. And he was like, 'I'm going to go and wait for him next Friday'. He told me he was at a different school to his. But he didn't have his uniform on, so that didn't make any difference. I said to him, me, because I grew up on Arran Way, I'm wary. I grew up with gangs of kids, and even now I'm wary. I think; that kid*



*could have a knife, that kid could do that. I never used to think like that when I was 13, and my 13 year old doesn't think like that. But I said to him, you have got to anticipate that every child you go past that is about your age group is going to try to take something off you. Because they probably haven't got nice things like you have got. You try to give your kids nice things, but they are not for other people to take off them'.*

Professionals working with young people in Kingshurst claimed that some felt they were unable to enter neighbouring areas due to tensions between postcode-based gangs, and we heard rumours of gang-related stabbings in the area. This meant that some young people from Kingshurst felt they were unable to access youth outreach services which took place in Smith's Wood or Chelmsley Wood (Meriden Park).



There was some uncertainty amongst professionals about the severity of this problem. As a local authority worker involved with family support stated: *'how much of it is urban myth and how much of it is a reality is sometimes hard to say'*. A local police sergeant was sceptical, saying that while there are some groups trying to form gangs around the B36 postcode, their activity is mainly limited to tagging. He believes that there isn't really an issue with young people not being able to move freely around the area: *'there is no evidence to suggest that these groups are going around engaging in criminal behaviour beyond the forms of anti-social behaviour that we see more broadly'*. However, a professional who works in family support across the north of Solihull borough said that she knew of one Kingshurst family who wouldn't cross the 'border' to access services in Chelmsley Wood due to a gang-related threat, while a professional who works directly with vulnerable families told us that the teenaged son of one family in his caseload had been badly beaten-up in a gang dispute. For families without teenaged children, the gang issue did not seem to be perceived as a serious threat. Jessica for example, a mum in her late 20s, had seen B36 tags around the area, but didn't pay much attention as *'I'm not that age'*.

The involvement of some local young people in criminality and anti-social behaviour was widely attributed to a lack of things for young people to do in the area. We were told that



youth services had been subject to severe cuts, and that youth-orientated facilities in Kingshurst's community centre, such as a recording studio, now lay idle as there were no longer staff members to supervise their use. This view was shared by the police sergeant, who described how remaining youth services in the area take place across a number of small or impermanent settings, whereas a permanent youth centre would enable officers to signpost young people and would be: *'a place where the team could go once a week to try and break down barriers with young people'*. Some local families though, felt that a lack of youth facilities was used as an 'excuse' for bad behaviour. Anya for example, highlighted her own experience of growing up in disadvantage, and *not* subsequently becoming involved in criminal or anti-social activity:

*'just 'cos you've not had much growing up doesn't mean you have to turn out like that'*

*'It's the way they've been brought up. You're not brought up round here, you're dragged up! But that's not everyone round here, and just 'cos you've not had much growing up doesn't mean you have to turn out like that. I didn't - so I don't know what's up with some of them!'*

Another parent, whilst disputing Anya's description of children being 'dragged-up' in the local area, felt that a failure of some parents to establish behavioural boundaries with their children was a cause of later anti-social or criminal behaviour:

*'I bring my kids up with respect for elders, and to say please and thanks you and things like that. And to think about other people if you know what I mean (...) A lot of parents don't do that with their kids. They don't teach them those kinds of things'*.

The police sergeant agreed that a *'lack of parental control'* or parents not being aware of what their child was doing or who they were hanging around with – sometimes as a result of problems within the family or a chaotic home environment - were causal factors in the bad behaviour of some of the young people they encountered.

Fears around crime and anti-social behaviour have found visual expression in the local built environment. The Parade for example – the pedestrianized shopping area in the centre of Kingshurst – has high metal gates topped with long spikes, while the roof of the doctor's surgery is ringed with loops of barbed wire and its windows covered with metal grills. The impact of this securitised built environment on residents' perceptions of these local spaces is discussed later in the report.



Figure 4: The gates on the Parade

## RACIAL TENSIONS

In 2014, Kingshurst and Fordbridge ward elected their first UKIP candidate to the local Council. The policy and rhetoric of UKIP has a focus on immigration, which the party situates as a social problem. The election of a UKIP candidate indicated that there could be racial tensions in the area and this was confirmed during the fieldwork period.

We heard many concerns about the distribution of resources locally. Many of our white British informants believed that they were significantly disadvantaged in terms of the allocation of resources, particularly houses. They believed that migrants were given preferential treatment to themselves:

*'I'm mean, I'm not a racist, but all these Polish and all these foreigners (...) They are coming over here, pinching the people who have just left school's jobs. Having properties - I mean, they come over here, they go to the Council, they go to the Job Centre, they get clothing grants, they get given furniture grants, they get given decorating grants, they get given houses. But what about us that are waiting for the houses? That is what really annoys me'.*

*'what about us that are waiting for the houses? That is what really annoys me'*

Like the informant above, many of the families felt that they were not racist, but that the local population should be given more priority; for example by giving migrant families flats and allocating houses to people like them: *'houses, when they appear, are not going to local people'*. Some people also thought that school places were reserved for newly arrived migrant families.

The idea that immigrant families get preferential treatment is quite engrained locally, despite no local or national policies which would actually allow this to happen. In this respect, the changes to Solihull Housing Association waiting list policy to give preferential treatment to those with a local connection are likely to be welcomed, and may go some way to alleviating the tensions in the local community.

Some of those who expressed concerns about resources were explicitly racist and we observed a number of incidents where derogatory comments against BME people were made. We were told about racist incidents in schools by both white and BME informants. For example, one white informant told us about an issue in school involving one of her daughter's [Emma's] friends:

*'There was one girl, because she was Black, she was bullied because she was Black. (...) She was half-caste, but this other [Black] girl was darker, and the half-caste one was like, 'if you play with her, you are not playing with me'. But Emma is best friends with the Black girl, so they used to play together'.*

Some children in the BME families we spoke to told us that they had been called racist names in school and that some white children would not play with them. In most of the cases we heard of, when they were aware of the incidents, schools did address these issues.

Some of our BME informants had experienced quite a high level of racism, and one family had been moved to ensure their safety after racist graffiti had appeared on their front door. However there was also an issue of lower level discrimination, we were told that incidents were often *not that overt* but that racial tensions were present in the background.

Much of the racism we observed or were told about was directed at Asian and Eastern European families. In relation to housing, dismay and anger was often directed towards Romanian and Polish families. Walter, a BME informant, told us that:

*'Here you wouldn't find... there isn't really people from South Asian backgrounds. So one of the things is for example, I understand that the few that are here are picked on. People from African Caribbean heritage perhaps less, that is to say it is more subtle - it has a more subtle aspect to it. And there is a very different history in this area of mixed heritage relationships. So children from mixed heritage are more likely to be from African Caribbean and the white indigenous population'.*

As we highlighted earlier, the local data confirms that there are lower numbers of Asian families and higher numbers of African Caribbean families in Kingshurst than in other areas of Solihull borough. The ward data does not distinguish between different groups of white residents, so Eastern European families are not counted separately to the majority white British population.

This research has shown that racism and racialised tensions over resource allocation are significant issue in this area. Given the increasing negativity about immigration nationally – in political discourse and the mainstream media - it is not surprising that many local families believe they are unfairly treated while immigrant families receive preferential treatment, despite there being no evidence of this, or local or national policies that would allow this to happen. These feelings of resentment, alongside overt and subtle racism, are a significant issue for migrant and BME families in the area.

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### HOUSING

Almost all the families we spoke to had issues with housing or knew friends and family in poor housing situations, and this seems to be the most widespread social problem in the area. Difficulties with housing cut across the family groups of Established, Settled and Transitory families and were present for those in social housing, owner occupation and those who were privately renting their homes.

#### HOUSING UNSUITABLE FOR FAMILY NEEDS

It is generally recognised that the current stock of social housing in North Solihull is inadequate in meeting the needs of families. Much of the housing is older, and there is a lack of houses and a disproportionate number of high-rise flats. Professionals told us that:

*'The design of a lot of the buildings in Kingshurst are very old, very antiquated, difficult to manage, heat and maintain. This stock doesn't lend itself well to the different needs that families now have for their housing environment (...) The proportion of stock in this borough is very limited in terms of houses. The churn I have of houses is limited. There are next to no two bedroom houses and a limited number of three and four beds.'*

*'This stock doesn't lend itself well to the different needs that families now have for their housing environment'*

Across Solihull Borough, at the time of the fieldwork we were told that there were about 19,500 on the current waiting list for housing but only about 900 empty properties a year, and about half of those empty properties will be high-rise flats. Solihull Housing Association is currently changing the criteria to be placed on the housing waiting list. One of the changes is to introduce an emphasis on local connections and those without a local connection will need to have been resident in the borough for two years. These changes will significantly reduce the number of people on the waiting list, although it will still mean that many families have little hope of rehousing. This move will probably be popular with Established families who often believe that they are disadvantaged in relation to housing, an issue which was discussed earlier in this report in relation to migrant communities in the area.

One of the most significant problems for families was the issue of overcrowding. Many families outgrew their properties and were unable to move for significant periods of time. This was not just an issue for social housing tenants waiting to be rehoused, but could also



Figure 5: Types of housing in Kingshurst

affect owner-occupiers and private rental tenants. It was not uncommon for families with four or more children to be living in two bedroom properties. Amy is in this situation:

*'They are supposed to share a bedroom, but I have to pull the three year old and she sleeps with me because they just won't sleep together. It is just chaos - they are always fighting. Arguing and all sorts. They just don't get on. The baby is in with us as well. We have [stepdaughter] staying as well. It is just finding room for them all. She comes every weekend, and in the holidays she will come in the week and stuff'.*

Lots of families found it difficult to find enough places for everyone to sleep, and this also meant that children would be sleeping in their parent's bedroom until they were quite old, or that some family members were having to use the living room as a sleeping place. This could put a strain on parents' relationships as one partner may end up sleeping on the sofa.

Alongside sleeping spaces, overcrowding meant that children may not have sufficient space for play, especially if the children were too young to sleep in bunk beds. Families could find that there was '*just no room to swing a cat*' as rooms were dominated by the need to provide sufficient beds.

Recent changes to housing benefit had also had a significant impact. The rules around the 'bedroom tax' mean that children of different sexes have to share bedrooms for longer or families lose a proportion of their housing benefit. We were told that the local housing association had changed their criteria in line with this policy. As Ruth explained:



*'When James was 6, I was eligible to be in a three bedroomed house but I waited for a year and nothing came available. Then they changed the rules so that James can be sharing until he is 10 (...) It's stupid. It's just prolonging the problem. People won't disappear from the waiting list'.*

Privacy was also a significant issue as children got older, and families worried about children reaching puberty and still having to share rooms with siblings of the opposite sex:

*'My sister has an 11 year old girl and a 9 year old boy and they have to share the same room. She is developing and everything and you think, where is the privacy? She is going through puberty and it is not right'.*

Living in a flat without access to a garden exacerbated the issues of overcrowding. Many of the families felt that *'there is no quality of life for children in these blocks'*. We were frequently told that children were trapped in a flat: *'they could go upstairs in a house, go play upstairs, downstairs, out in the garden, out in the front. But in a flat you are stuck in'*.

*'there is no quality of life for children in these blocks'*

The lack of a garden meant that children were often restricted in getting fresh air, and exercise. Parents felt that important childhood activities were missing and that children lacked a space to play independently of close adult supervision. As Judy states:

*'I feel like my kids haven't got a childhood'*

*'I feel like my kids haven't got a childhood (...) You know when we was kids, we had a garden and we could put a pool out. Whereas, when these are stuck in the flat, it isn't nice really. I would love to have a garden for them. I really would. They like their own freedom, but when it is, it seems really silly, it is just a garden, but it is not really'.*

Not being able to provide experiences such as paddling pools also had an emotional impact on parents as they were clearly upset about the restrictions to their children's lives.

All of the parents we spoke to without gardens stressed how they tried to get their children outside every day. When it was feasible they would take them to local parks or open spaces, or go for a walk to the shops to get out of the house. Their ability to do this was sometimes hampered by problems with the lifts in high rise blocks or difficulties getting buggies up and down the stairs where families were living on upper floors in properties such as maisonettes. On most occasions, lifts would be repaired in a few hours, but one family told us that their lift had been out of order for four days. Amy stated: *'I have to wait. I can't really take one down, because of leaving the rest of the kids'*.

For families with children with additional needs the issues of overcrowding and lack of outdoor spaces was often particularly acute. Some families reported difficulties with this: *'I*

*have got no room for her. Obviously when she does get that frustrated and she needs time to chill out as I call it. She needs her own space’.* Under the ‘bedroom tax’ rules, initially there were no exemptions for children with disabilities who needed their own rooms. Following legal challenges to the legislation,<sup>12</sup> there have been some changes, although not all children who might benefit from their own room meet the criteria. The lack of space could reduce the ability to provide good care for children with disabilities and additional needs, and this could also have an impact on their siblings.

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## POOR HOUSING QUALITY

In addition to housing that didn’t meet their needs, many families were living with poor housing quality. Again, these issues impacted on families in social housing, private rentals and some owner occupiers. Families reported issues of damp and mould, particularly in some of the blocks of flats and maisonettes, as this discussion between families illustrates:

*Helen: ‘There is no natural sunlight in any of the flats. The flats are quite dark and dismal. I get all silverfish everywhere in mine’.*

*Natalie: ‘Me too, in the bathroom, on my cooker everywhere’*

*Beverley: ‘In her [indicates daughter] bedroom, we have gone over it a few times. I can’t afford to do all the damp treatment and what not, but we have gone over it a few times. And I have reported it twice and they [housing association] have come out and said ‘it is fine’.*

*Helen: ‘In my bedroom, all the wall where the end of the block is, the door, that outer wall, all the skirting board, all mouldy. I keep trying to clean it off.’*

*Natalie: ‘From up there [indicates ceiling], it has been leaking since I moved in 3 years ago. And my kitchen is all mouldy because of it.’*

Whilst most of the families reporting poor quality housing were in social housing, private rental tenants also had issues. Unlike the families in social housing, they were often deterred from reporting housing issues to landlords because:

*‘you are in a very difficult situation, as obviously this person can dictate if you can stay in a house or not (...) if you are in a house where the electrics are not right or the window is broken and needs fixing. So you want to push forward and get these things fixed, but*

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<sup>12</sup> For example see *Burnip v Birmingham City Council & Anor* (Rev 1) [2012]. EWCA Civ 629 of 15 May 2012 (Court of Appeal of England and Wales).

*knowing that ultimately, after a series of letters, phone calls, maybe legal help, at any point you can get evicted.'*

Some owner occupiers also had issues with the quality of their properties. This was mainly related to a financial issue that limited what they could and could not afford to do. In some cases, repairs had to wait until they had the money to carry them out. Diane stated: *'Because there is only one wage coming in (...) The roof of the conservatory leaks, so we can't use that. And sometimes I think, why did we buy this house, everything is falling apart'.*

Many of the professionals expressed concern about some of the conditions that families were living in. Many believed it was linked to the exacerbation of health issues amongst their children, with asthma particularly highlighted: *'A lot of our families are prone to asthma and eczema and it [damp and mould] certainly does aggravate breathing problems'.* Families with Solihull Housing Association may eventually see an improvement as there is a current programme of work to upgrade and improve the accommodation. However not all families will have their position improved in the foreseeable future.

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## NUISANCE NEIGHBOURS

Some of the families we spoke to had or were experiencing problems with nuisance neighbours. There were more concerns reported by families living in flats than other types of accommodation.

Excessive noise was mentioned by some families and this was a particular concern when it kept their children awake during the night. Amy told us:

*'We have had problems with noisy neighbours. It's not been too bad lately, but it used to be every night. (...) They were banging until 3 in the morning, and the kids were awake, and I had just had the baby. (...) And it was getting louder and louder. You can hear them arguing and you can hear them shouting...'*

*'You can hear them arguing and you can hear them shouting'*

Other families told us of people *'kicking other people's doors in'*, and in one block children had been setting fires in the stairs. Many families were worried that they could wrongly become targets of disputes or that they would not be able to get their children out of the flat in an emergency.

However, despite frequent incidents and a high rate of concern, few of the families we interviewed had wanted to take much official action. Although they would ask neighbours to be quieter, they had little faith that a formal report of nuisance would result in any action.



Families in social housing usually said that they had not contacted the housing association over noise as they *'don't think they would really do anything'*.

*'once there was a used condom thrown off the balcony, I watched it come down. Hot bleach, emptying buckets, hot water ... Nothing was done'*

Indeed in the few cases when people had made formal reports, it had not seemed to have led to improvements. In some of the high-rise flats there is a significant issue of people throwing rubbish out of their windows, and Diane told us that she had contacted the anti-social behaviour team about this: *'I have been outside and just missed a cigarette butt (...) once there was a used condom thrown off the balcony, I watched it come down. Hot bleach, emptying buckets, hot water (...) Nothing was done'*.

Unfortunately, for many families these issues are not classed as sufficiently difficult for them to be rehoused. They remained on the social housing waiting list for often considerable periods of time.

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## WAITING LIST ISSUES

As outlined above, the waiting list for housing with Solihull Housing Association is very long and few properties become available each year. The waiting list itself is operated using a banded system. At the time of the fieldwork there were seven bands, but this was being reduced to five bands at the end of September 2014. Applications for a place on the waiting list are placed in a particular band depending on the assessed level of housing need. Once placed in a band, families need to bid for properties via a website.

One of the criteria for getting into a higher priority band for housing was on the basis of medical need. However, there are some issues around what counts as evidence for these cases. One professional told us:

*'We have been told now that the only way they will consider a family moving up a band is if they have a medical letter from a consultant (...) Which is not very fair, because they are paying £20 [to the GP] and it is actually going to make no difference'*.

For some families, the online system was far from transparent, and we were told that it was not sophisticated enough to account for bedroom size as well as number of bedrooms. For example, one family thought they had been successful in their bid for a three bedroom house, only to find that they did not fully meet the criteria because two of the bedrooms were single so it was considered too small for their family: *'they said the property I was offered was too small, and if I had moved in, I would have been overcrowded'*. The family

were currently in an overcrowded maisonette, and whilst an overcrowded house may not have improved the living accommodation, it would have given them a much longed for garden. The family were not, however, given the option to make their own decision about that, and so they remain on the waiting list.

The desire for a house with a garden was a key factor in many of the families staying on the waiting list for a considerable period of time. The families knew that if they opted to move to a flat with sufficient bedrooms, then they would probably never get a house as they would no longer be classed as having housing needs. We were told by professionals that *'managing expectations'* was a really difficult task as *'people's choices don't always match with what is available'*. Homelessness is also a significant issue; we were told that it had grown by 30% in the Borough in the last year. Major causes included harassment and violence (including domestic violence) and growing numbers of private rented tenants being evicted. However, even when families did manage to get rehoused, this was not always the end of their housing problems. As one professional told us:

*'Even if we can get the families rehoused (...) they sometimes go from out of the frying pan into the fire. We have had one family rehoused last week and they have gone from an environment of overcrowding to one in which they've got drug dealing happening next door.'*

*'Even if we can get the families rehoused ... they sometimes go from out of the frying pan into the fire'*

Social housing and owner occupier families are left with difficult choices to make. They can continue to live in their current house or move into the private rental sector. Whilst a privately rented home may improve living accommodation, the insecurity of the sector means that families would be vulnerable to having to move again in a short period of time.

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## HOUSING ISSUES

It is very clear that many families in Kingshurst will continue to live in unsuitable, undesirable or poor quality homes for a significant period of time. Whilst there are some small developments of new social housing stock and a long-term programme of improvements, we were told that a long-term plan for housing regeneration is currently stalled. As one professional put it: *'the Council bankrolled the 'Regen' programme significantly and then maxed out its credit card'*. Disadvantaged families are disproportionately impacted by changes in housing policy and it is clear that current policies have had a detrimental impact on many families in the area. In the current political climate, there is little that can be done to significantly improve the housing options for families in the area, and even if policies were reversed, it would take time for significant investment to

be made, which means that it would not necessarily benefit families and children currently living in the area.

## PARKS AND PLAY AREAS

The availability and quality of parks and play areas was a frequent topic of discussion during the research; both amongst professionals working in the area and families.

This was an aspect of life in Kingshurst that was discussed in both positive and negative terms. When asked what was good about living in Kingshurst, families often replied that the area had several parks and green spaces. Despite feeling that there were many improvements that could be made to the local parks, families recognised them as an asset in a built-up urban area.

Parks were frequently identified by children as the 'best thing' about living in Kingshurst during 'draw and write' activities, and in family interviews younger children spoke about playing on the swings and playing football in the parks, feeding the ducks at Babbs Mill lake or going to the playground at Meriden Park (in nearby Chelmsley Wood) as their favourite local activities.

My diary

Please draw or write about something that made you happy last week.

Did you go somewhere nice?  
Did you see friends or family?

Last week I was happy because I went to the park.

Please draw or write about something that you would like to do next week near home

This could be something that you know is possible or something that you really wish could happen.

I would like to do near home is celebrate birthday.

Where I live

Please draw what makes you happy and what makes you sad.

going to the park play on the slide and on the swings

not going to disney land

Figure 6: Draw & write sheets completed by primary-age children

Babbs Mill - a large green space in the southern part of Kingshurst incorporating a nature reserve, a man-made lake adjacent to the River Cole, and sports and play facilities - was mentioned by both families and professionals as a positive asset of the area. Current plans to build housing on parts of Babbs Mill are strongly opposed by many local residents. For families who use this space, it offers their children a chance to experience messy outdoor

play and interaction with the natural world. As Claire, a parent of two children aged 7 and 4, and a 6 month old baby, explained during a visit to Babbs Mill:

*'I don't even mind if it rains, it still gets them out the house. They love it. She's [4 year old] gone and got herself wet anyway - stuck her bum in the lake! She took her wellies off because she was doing footprints with her wet feet'.*

Other parents described how they took their children to Babbs Mill for walks, to feed the ducks, or to go fishing at the lake, with some who were brought-up in the area themselves explaining that this was a continuation of their own childhood experiences.

However, this positive view was countered by a range of concerns about the safety and suitability of local parks for children's play, due to issues such as broken play equipment, littering and dog fouling, and criminal or anti-social behaviour. Such concerns prevent some families from using these green spaces on their doorstep, and consequently children's access to outdoor play is limited. Indeed, during visits to Kingshurst members of the research team were often struck by how few families could be seen using parks in the area. This was particularly striking given that much of the research took place during a period of hot and sunny weather in the school summer holidays, and in an area where many householders do not have access to their own garden. Improvements to parks and play facilities that *'would make it a bit more comfortable for people to take their kids to the park'* was a frequent suggestion when research participants (both families and professionals) were asked what could be done to improve the area.

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## CONFLICTS OVER USE OF PARKS

A key issue appears to be conflict over the use of parks between families with younger children, and older children and teenagers. Earlier in this report, we described how families in the area frequently complained about young people 'hanging around' on the Parade or in local streets and behaving in a way that was perceived as intimidating by many other residents. Young people were also frequently blamed for incidents of crime and anti-social behaviour in the community. A similar dynamic emerged in relation to parks, and we heard numerous complaints from both families with younger children and professionals working with families about inappropriate use of parks by older children and teenagers, including the use of 'mini-motos' and other small motorbikes. One mother of 3 children aged 11, 5 and 3, described one such incident in Kingshurst Park:

*'I've been crossing the park before and I've had to grab all my kids. One had the football, one had the scooter and I was letting the little one walk and he was all over the place. And this motorbike just comes across the path. And I have had to shout, 'grab the football, get off*

*your scooter' to my kids. I shouldn't have to do that. Motorbikes shouldn't be on the path. There is never coppers there when you want them is there?'*

Another parent recounted how her child had been prevented from using play equipment by a group of older children: *'there was a load of older kids sitting on the climbing frame. She [daughter] loves the monkey bars, and her dad shouted at them. They were in the way basically, because she was trying to get passed and they were in the way'*; while Claire compared the pleasant afternoon spent at the Babbs Mill lakeside with other experiences of parks in the area: *'Here today, it is lovely, and just normal, and people who should be on here with their kids. But usually, when you go to the other parks there are too many young ones, swearing and what else they do'*.



*Figure 7: Broken play equipment at Babbs Mill*



*Figure 8: Graffiti at Kingshurst Park*

Families and professionals complained that children's play equipment in the parks regularly got broken and was left un-repaired for long periods, or was vandalised and defaced with graffiti. One piece of equipment in the play area at Babbs Mill had reportedly been broken for so long that few families we spoke to at the park remembered how it was supposed to be used. As Sharie and Lee, who regularly use Kingshurst Park with their 4 year old daughter explained: *'sometimes you see damage to the equipment which isn't nice cos she'll ask 'why can't I do that' or 'why can't I go on that''*.

A number of families and professionals made unfavourable comparisons between the standard of maintenance of parks in Kingshurst and Smith's Wood, and those in neighbouring areas. Sharie for example, described a park she and her daughter visit on the border of Chelmsley Wood and Marston Green: *'that's always being vandalised too, but I think they address it quicker. I've noticed they've had broken things, but 2 or 3 weeks later they've repaired it'*.



It was widely agreed that a higher standard of maintenance was needed in Kingshurst's parks to ensure that they were clean and safe for families to use, and it was felt by some that the Borough Council were more attentive to parks in the south of the borough. One professional cited Brueton Park in Solihull town centre as a contrasting example: *'it's really clean – you don't see anything wrong'*.

Young people are blamed for the vandalism of play equipment in Kingshurst's parks. Whilst this kind of behaviour was widely condemned, parents and professionals did express some understanding as to why it might occur. One parent commented: *'there is nothing for them [teenagers] to do. That's why the parks get destroyed'* - a view shared by many.

*'There is nothing for teenagers to do. That's why the parks get destroyed'*

As well as causing tensions between different groups of park users, the varied ways in which younger children and older children or teenagers wish to or are able to use parks and play areas can place limitations on the leisure activities of families with children in multiple age brackets. Lauren, who has a 13 year old as well as 2 children under 5, described the challenge of finding a park or play area that is suitable for the whole family:

*'My kids like the adventure playground at Meriden Park [Chelmsley Wood] (...) It is quite dangerous for the younger ones, but my older one is fine there (...) My oldest one now, he is really tall as well, so he can't go into the ball pit, whereas the younger ones want to. So I have got to try and find somewhere for him to go or something for him to do, or he will just sit there when they are playing and it's not really fair on him. They don't cater for people with different ages'*.

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## **PARKS AS UNSAFE OR UNWELCOMING PLACES**

There is a strong perception amongst many families that Kingshurst's parks are unsafe due to a dangerous physical environment and criminal or anti-social behaviour.

Dog-fouling and littering was identified as a problem throughout the area, but is of particular concern in parks and play areas - *'you are scared to let the kids on the grass'* – and we were told that broken glass had been found in bark chippings in a play area. We also heard frequent reports of alcohol and drug use in parks. Tina, for example, told us that she had seen two used hypodermic needles whilst visiting Babbs Mill with her grandchildren. This was confirmed by other families, who also told us that people frequently use the park to get drunk or smoke cannabis.

We were told that there was a half-way house for ex-offenders situated close to Babbs Mill. This was another source of anxiety for families, some of whom believed that the residents included convicted paedophiles. As Marie, the mother of an 11 year old girl explained:

*‘Children can’t go to the park on their own... Once we are home, it’s like we are in prison’*

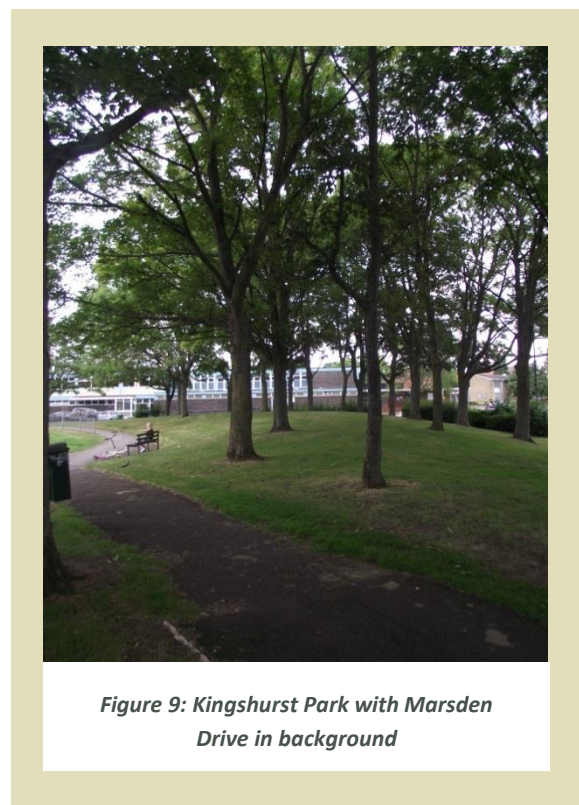
*‘I don’t understand why you would have a playground opposite a block where paedophiles are put (...) You see them all standing there in the morning like this (pulls a menacing face) (...) so the children can’t go to the park on their own (...) once we are home, it’s like we are in prison’.*

While it is impossible for the research team (or local residents) to verify the claim that the block houses convicted paedophiles, the belief has certainly taken hold in the local community and is a major cause of concern for some parents.

We heard repeated criticism from families and professionals of the lack of fencing around Kingshurst Park. There is fencing on one side of the park, but the side which faces onto busy Marsden Drive does not have a fence, which causes parents to worry that their children may stray onto the road. One professional described how this issue had emerged strongly in a ‘pop-up’ consultation with local families:

*‘It is right in an area where you have got 3 danger points, you have the road by the Parade, the road that leads down past the block of flats that you can get access to, and you have the other road. If you had a fence there you could sit down and let the kids play, rather than chasing the kids round the park’.*

A number of families we interviewed confirmed this concern, and cited the danger posed by the road as a reason they didn’t use this park, despite its convenient central location. Again, this situation led to unfavourable comparisons with parks in neighbouring areas or in the south of the borough. A playgroup worker stated that the parks there have a lot of railings around them compared to those in the north, resulting in a safer space for young children.



A further barrier to some families’ use and enjoyment of parks is a lack of toilet facilities. As one professional explained: *‘if you have kids of a certain age, you can’t expect them to hold*

*off going to the toilet (...) those little things become a big barrier'. Beth, a mum of 2, talked about this problem in relation to Babbs Mill: 'there are no toilet facilities, which is a big thing (...) Toilets would be useful because with the kids it's a long walk home'.*

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## *PARKS OUTSIDE THE AREA*

Given the above concerns, some parents took their children out of Kingshurst to access parks and play spaces elsewhere. Popular destinations included a privately-run indoor soft play centre in Chelmsley Wood – 'Jungle Juniorz', although the cost of admission to this facility was a barrier to some families, particularly those with more than one child: *'It is a little bit expensive for us (...) It costs me £7 to take these [2 children], and if it is busy you only get an hour'*. Others took their children to parks in nearby areas like Chelmsley Wood, Shard End and Marston Green, or further afield – to Sutton Park or Cannon Hill Park in Birmingham. They felt that parks in these areas were better maintained, safer and contained higher quality or more imaginative play equipment (although the problems of intimidation by 'big kids' and vandalism of play equipment were also mentioned in relation to Chelmsley Wood's parks). However, for some the ability to travel outside of the local area to access preferred parks and play facilities was hindered by a reliance on public transport, which could be expensive and difficult with several small children in tow.

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## *IMPACTS OF BARRIERS TO FAMILIES' USE OF PARKS AND PLAY AREAS*

The barriers which some families face in accessing safe and welcoming local parks and play facilities was recognised by professionals as an impediment to healthy lifestyles and child development. As one professional working in the health sector explained:

*'Things like kicking, throwing, riding a bike, things that you would expect an under 5 to be doing, they are certainly not reaching those milestones because they are not getting the opportunity (...) It is impacting on them, particularly with obesity and exercise. You are trying to promote a healthy lifestyle, but you can't really when there is not that kind of space or the amenities to do it'.*

*'You are trying to promote a healthy lifestyle, but you can't really when there is not that kind of space or the amenities to do it'*

As discussed in the earlier section on housing, this was identified as a particular problem for families living in flats or maisonettes who did not have access to a garden.



## KINGSHURST PARADE



Figure 10: Kingshurst Parade

The main shopping area in Kingshurst is the Parade - an enclosed pedestrianized precinct accessed by walkways on each side.

The ground floors of the buildings house two charity shops, two convenience stores, a small Co-op supermarket, a Greggs bakery, a butchers, a pharmacy, a hairdressers, a tanning salon, an opticians, and two takeaways, as well as some local services and community spaces - a Post Office, a community arts centre, a solicitor's office, and the offices of an advice and advocacy service for disabled people. At the time of the research, one of the shop fronts, which previously housed a greengrocers, was empty. The upper floors of the buildings are housing. The section of the Parade which faces out onto Marsden Drive also includes the library and community centre, a doctor's surgery, a dental practice, a taxi office and a café. To the rear of the Parade is an unused and dilapidated porta-cabin that used to house the children's centre.

Adjectives such as 'grotty' and 'tired' were used by families and professionals to describe the general appearance of the Parade. Recently, attempts have been made to improve the appearance of the Parade through the installation of public art, but it was felt by many that this was not enough and a more ambitious overhaul was needed. Several families and professionals commented that the spikes and barbed wire which tops the Parade's outer walls and the roof of the doctor's surgery did not give a welcoming impression. As one local parent said: *'it looks like a prison camp'*.

## COMPARISONS WITH OTHER AREAS

As was the case with Kingshurst's parks, the Parade was compared unfavourably with shopping areas in nearby neighbourhoods. Families and professionals commented positively on the redevelopment of the shopping area in Chelmsley Wood (which included the opening of large Asda supermarket), and many felt that a similar level of redevelopment would benefit Kingshurst.

There was a clear perception, amongst families and some professionals, that Kingshurst (and in some accounts, the north of the borough more generally) was neglected in comparison to the south of the borough – with the tired appearance of the Parade seemingly emblematic of this. Many of the families we spoke to did not visit the southern part of Solihull borough, but for some of the professionals who lived in the south or who worked across the borough as a whole, the contrast between Solihull town centre and Kingshurst was stark:

*'You have got [South] Solihull, and that is where people get services. That is where people get street cleaners, that is where you get the grass cut (...) Whereas people in North Solihull, we are given the raw end of the deal. We are not really thought about. If you have seen Christmas at Touchwood [shopping centre in Solihull town centre], and then you see Christmas in Kingshurst, it is a joke (...) You would not think we were in the same borough'.*

*'If you have seen Christmas at Touchwood and then you see Christmas in Kingshurst, it is a joke ... You would not think we were in the same borough'*

It was felt that the neglect of the Parade reinforced a feeling widely held locally that Kingshurst was not really part of Solihull, and that Solihull considered itself 'above' Kingshurst (and in some accounts the north of the borough more generally). As one professional commented: *'It tells local people 'this is all you're worth', whereas Touchwood is being extended to twice the size (...) Kingshurst people just don't think Solihull is for them'.* It is important to note that these accounts differ from those of some of the local authority workers encountered in the course of the research, who felt that significant investment *had* been made in the area.

Many families and professionals commented that there were few places to buy food - particularly fresh food - in Kingshurst, and that those food shops which were available, such as the small Co-op supermarket, charged higher prices than larger stores in neighbouring areas. There is a Morrisons supermarket around a mile from the centre of Kingshurst on Chester Road which some families used (usually walking there and getting a taxi back with their shopping bags), whilst other families travelled on the bus or by taxi to Asda or Iceland in Chelmsley Wood. However, this could be challenging for people with mobility difficulties

or those who had a number of small children, meaning that they instead shopped locally and paid higher prices for basic goods:

*'if they have the kids with them on a night and they need bread or milk, rather than like in Asda - a broad range of breads and you can pick from the most expensive down to the £1.50 - at the local shop it is going to cost you £2.50'.*

The preference of many families to shop outside the area meant that: *'On a Saturday, which should be a busy day, the shops are like a ghost town'* (Jessica – mum of two), which itself added to an air of neglect. Jessica continued: *'work is needed to build it back up again; to get people to come back to the area (...) You need something there to draw people in. Maybe if there was more stuff and it was more modernised'.*

*'You need something to draw people in. Maybe if there was more stuff and it was more modernised'*

Some people however, did choose to shop locally. A representative of a local charity described how he takes groups of young people with disabilities and additional needs into the shops on the Parade, and always finds the staff to be very friendly. He speculated that this friendly community atmosphere also appealed to other local residents, who could combine doing their shopping with chatting to local friends and acquaintances. This was echoed by the parent of a child with additional needs, who explained that she took her son into the local shops as the staff knew him and weren't taken aback by his behaviour, whereas when she visited shops outside the area she felt she was being judged as a bad parent who was allowing her child to behave naughtily. This sense of a friendly community atmosphere was also referenced by a volunteer in one of the charity shops on the Parade:

*'Although around the shops is a bit empty and not really like a community, in ways you do feel part of a community. Working in the charity shop I love all the regulars coming in. I think that even when I get a job and move on I would still be drawn back to the shop as it's like a little family. We all stick together and you get to meet other people who maybe aren't from the area and are lonely. It's nice'.*

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## VIEWS ON REGENERATION

As well as improving the look of the area, it was felt by some professionals that regeneration of the Parade may offer the opportunity to create a geographic hub for local services. This may consequently increase the uptake of services and local sharing of information about which services are available. A local health professional explained:

*'I think you could really make something of the Parade. It could really be developed into the hub of the community. Like they have developed the precinct with Chelmsley Wood Primary Care Centre. I think that could be the focus, and the children's centre could be extended into it, and the doctor's could be. It could all be under one kind of remit. And I think if families know that we are all working together as a community, I think that would help them engage. I think we're all kind of separate here. So the children's centre is here, the doctor's is there, the shops are there. I think we all need to be under one roof almost'.*

This view was shared by another professional:

*'What is missing [in Kingshurst] is a hub. A town centre, like in Chelmsley Wood (...) that community, that networking, that talking to other parents about what services are out there (...) Having a central point for everyone to go to (...) I have seen the massive change in Chelmsley Wood with Asda, and the fact that a lot more people are tapping into Chelmsley Wood. The library is being used a lot more. It might be the case that they [parents] are out shopping with their kids and think let's go to the library first. There just seems to be a lot more activity, compared to the library at Kingshurst, where I have not seen anybody inside it. So I think it draws people to it'.*

*'What is missing in Kingshurst is a hub... A central point for everyone to go to'*

Another professional, from the local authority, felt that improving the Parade would increase people's pride in Kingshurst and instil a greater sense of community identity:

*'It would promote that there's positive input going into the area – that they're worth the investment, and to make them feel better about where they live and the stuff they can access with their kids. In turn, I'm sure that would make them feel more positive, and want to look after it more'.*



Figure 11: Entrance to Kingshurst Library

Families agreed that making the Parade more welcoming and attractive may encourage residents to make better use of the services already located there. Beth for example, thought that the appearance of the library should be improved to encourage usage: *'compared to other libraries like Shard End and Chelmsley Wood it's not very nice. It doesn't look inviting (...) It's a shame these places aren't being used as much as they could'.*



We heard a range of suggestions as to what shops and services people would like to see in a revamped Parade. These included a budget supermarket, a shop selling fresh fruit and vegetables, and a family-friendly pub. News that the Post Office may close had worried some, who thought that this was a service that should be retained. It was also noted that a free 24-hour cashpoint would be a useful addition to the area.

However, there was some scepticism around what regeneration of the Parade would actually achieve, seemingly rooted in disappointment at the outcome of the previous 'Regen' regeneration programme. According to local families and professionals, this programme had failed to deliver what had been promised:

*'They put in these grand plans of what they were going to do in Kingshurst (...) They were going to do the parks, new community buildings, new shops. They have knocked down the pub [The Mountford]. They were going to build all these new houses, and knocked down all these flats. Then all of a sudden, that was it. It just went undercover (...) We kind of get these promises, then all of a sudden we are just left'.*



Figure 12: Site awaiting redevelopment

Others felt that the Parade, despite not being particularly aesthetically pleasing, did meet many local needs, and was already a safe and familiar space for many members of the community. Representatives of two local charities aired their reservations about potential regeneration of the Parade during a group interview:

*'Whilst we do have a bit of a rubbish Parade, we do have a centre - a Post Office, the Co-op, the chemist, etc. People have a need to come here and that's how we develop relationships, but I'd be worried we'd lose that (...) Shiny new buildings aren't necessarily the way to build a community and to keep it together'.*

*'Those facilities are so much more than a shop ... people get to know each other in these spaces'*

One of the charity workers speculated that it may be younger residents who are less satisfied with the Parade, before commenting: *'if you're an older person who has lived here you tend to think differently. A lot of people remember when it was built after the war and this was a lovely place to come and live'*. Another added: *'those facilities are so much more than a shop (...) people get to know each other in these spaces'*.

## SERVICES AND AMENITIES

Apart from local health services, which everybody we spoke to considered to be very poor, there were mixed opinions on many of the other local services and organisations. Most families thought there was a reasonable quantity of services for younger children, although they did not always like what was on offer. This was not the case for many young people and this was the group identified as having few resources in the area. Children and young people with additional needs are also currently underserved.

### HEALTH SERVICES

Many families told us about the poor health services in the area. There is only one GP practice located in Kingshurst and it has a history of problems. The previous service providers had failed a Care Quality Commission inspection and the practice was taken over last year by a new provider. Families told us this had led to some improvements, but it was still not generally seen as a good service:

*'Another issue in this area is the doctors. It is terrible. They have got locums in (...) and they are there for another 12 months (...). It is getting a bit better, but it is still a dump round there. (...). It really is a bad issue at the moment'.*

Families told us about difficulties getting appointments, the use of an expensive 0800 number for appointment making (although this has now been changed), discourteous staff, an unpleasant and unwelcoming building, and being rushed through appointments without being able to really discuss their health issues in detail. There had also been some media reports earlier in 2014 stating that the service might close completely<sup>13</sup> which was raising concerns in the area.

Related to health services, there are also significant issues for access to services and amenities for children with disabilities and additional needs. These will be detailed later in this section of the report.

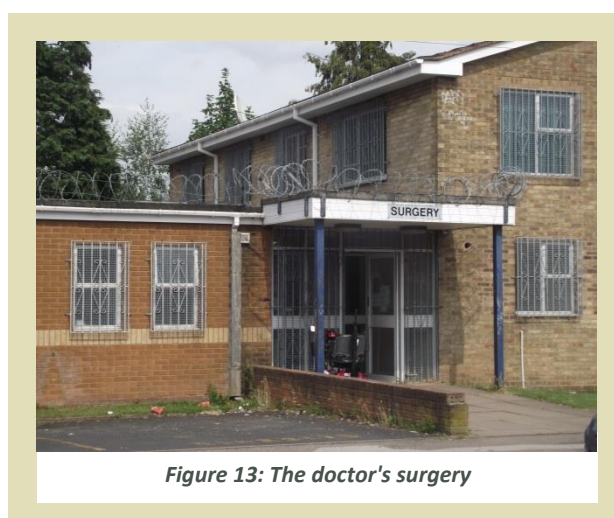


Figure 13: The doctor's surgery

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<sup>13</sup> Solihull News (10/2/14) Fears that surgery closure will deprive patients of care  
<http://www.solihullnews.net/news/local-news/fears-kingshurst-surgery-closure-deprive-6691784>

## SCHOOLS

There were mixed opinions about the schools in the local area, with some parents thinking that they were good and others raising concerns about the educational provision. All parents we spoke to cared deeply about their children's education and when issues arose they had lots of concerns. Parents with concerns tended to give a lot more detail about the issues than those who were happy, and this is reflected in the data.

Families who were pleased at the education provision that their children were getting often spoke about the strict discipline of the schools and they felt that this was important to ensure a good educational experience: *'It is a good school, really good. I wanted her to go to a strict Catholic school'*. Other schools were praised because of good facilities. Some schools were seen as preferable to others because of the perceived background of the children that went there. This was a particular issue for Settled families who wanted: *'a school with a better group of students in it that are probably going to go somewhere in life'*. This is clearly linked to issues around stigma that are prevalent in the area, and that were discussed earlier in this report.

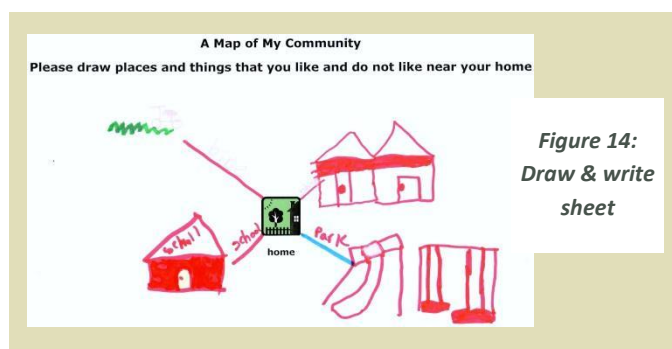


Figure 14:  
Draw & write  
sheet

Unsurprisingly, school featured heavily in children's accounts of their day to day lives in the local area, and depictions of schools were frequently included in the draw and write activities the research team conducted with primary-age children during the fieldwork with families.

Most of the primary-age children we spoke to enjoyed school overall, although some were more enthusiastic about it than others. Willow (9) said that science was her favourite subject at school, but she doesn't like English because it is a really long lesson. In contrast, Zara (5) said she thought school was *'boring'*. Zara likes reading a little bit, but does not like maths at all.

Young people we spoke to who attended local secondary schools all said that they were getting on alright at school and had mixed ideas about their future plans. Leanne and Robert (both 16) were just finishing year 11. Leanne had decided to stay on in her school sixth form. She said that most of her friends were leaving and planning on attending the local college, but she had decided to stay as she wanted to take A-Levels rather than undertake a vocational course which was what the local college mainly offered. Robert had made a similar decision to Leanne's friends and was planning on taking a BTEC course that was directly linked to his future career aspirations at a college in Birmingham.

Some families were worried about the quality of the teaching provided in local schools, and felt that their children were not receiving adequate attention. Sometimes the concerns were about the organisation of classes. Tracey had concerns about this:

*'They have had two different teachers for the last three years, two teachers, like two days one teacher and three days the other. She is going into year 3, and I think it is just one teacher with a teaching assistant, so I am going to see if that helps'.*

For other parents, the issues were much more about the lack of progress that their children were making. The families who had concerns had all tried to speak to their child's / children's school about it, but often didn't feel that they were listened too. Many families attributed the lack of response to them as parents to stigmatisation, which they felt meant that schools and teachers didn't take their concerns seriously or act upon them:

*'the amount of time I have been into the school and had words with them. I can't remember how many times'*

*'Now it just seems to be like, the way she is getting support, but I don't think she has got the help she needs. I mean the amount of time I have been into the school and had words with them. I can't remember how many times'.*

Some of the parents who were unhappy with their child's / children's school had contemplated moving their child to a different school to try to secure a better education, but this was seen as a difficult option, especially if children had been attending the school for some time:

*'It's only been in the last few years that we've noticed how bad it has become but in the meantime the children have become settled there. It's not fair to just move them. But their education and everything is suffering.'*

In response to concerns about schooling, we were told that some families were choosing to home educate their children, although we are unable to ascertain the extent of this within the area.

There was a marked difference between professionals and families when we asked about what they saw in the future for children. Professionals believed that many families in the area lacked aspirations for their children. For example we were told that *'it's amazing how little ambition people have for their children'*. This is in sharp contrast to the families we spoke to, who all stressed how important education was in securing a future for their children. Established, Settled and Transitory families all wanted their children to do well and had ambitions for careers such as medicine, even if their children were not currently keen: *'I'd prefer him to be a doctor in the future. But he is saying he don't want to be a doctor'*.



### AMENITIES FOR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

There are quite a few activities for pre-school children in the local area. These include stay-and-play groups, playgroups and nursery provision. Some families were regular attenders at stay-and-play groups whereas others did not attend at all. We heard a number of complaints about the current provision, which were often linked to issues around stigma.

Many of the Settled families were unhappy at the range of pre-school provision on offer locally. They felt that the services were designed for those with parenting problems, and that the services they wanted, and which they felt would enhance their children's development, were only on offer in other areas:

*'we have to go to Water Orton for baby sensory group and that, and we pay for that, which is fine, we don't mind paying (...) there's a lot for parents who don't work and there's a lot for people who don't want to access, but there isn't a lot for parents who are willing to pay and who are willing to access... they seem to be aiming more towards the special needs parents and the parents that don't work - who are on benefits'.*

*'they seem to be aiming more towards the special needs parents and the parents that don't work - who are on benefits'*

Other families were unhappy at the changes in the emphasis of some of the services, which they perceived as being more about policing parents' behaviour rather than focusing on children's play: *'The children's centre was a lot better and they did more things for the children. Whereas now we feel it's more orientated towards adults'*. Some parents stopped using services, changed to other groups, or started their own groups when they were unhappy about what was on offer: *'They have stopped giving the snack and juice. Basically they have stopped providing for you apart from the kids toys. We opened up our own one here on a Thursday'*.

As many families were on low incomes, a high number qualified for government funding for childcare places for 2 year olds. However, there is a shortage of places locally and some families were on waiting lists for places. Professionals confirmed the lack of places available:

*'What we are really struggling with is lack of childcare provision. That is a biggie for us at the minute. A lot of our families qualify for the 2 year nursery funding but I have got nowhere to send them. They are all completely full'.*

Overall, there are quite a number of different activities for pre-school children in the local area, but they do not necessarily meet families' needs. Most Established families want a communal space where the children can play together and parents can catch up with friends and family. Settled families would prefer more structured sessions such as baby signing and sensory groups. Transitory families may need more support and may use sessions as a way of developing a social network. The lack of childcare places is a significant problem, but professionals working in the area told us that the funding that is available is insufficient to be able to increase local provision. There are also barriers to accessing some of the services and amenities orientated towards pre-school-age children for those parents who also have a child / children in an older age bracket. Jessica for example, a single mum to children aged 4 and 9 who was on a low income and thus unable to afford childcare, explained that she could not always attend the pre-school activities which were available for her young son, as her daughter was not yet old enough to be left unsupervised but could not (and would not want to) attend the pre-school sessions.

#### AMENITIES FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

The primary-age children involved in the research took part in a wide range of activities. Most of them did at least one out-of-school activity, and some did several. The children attended dance classes or played in football teams, whilst others attended uniformed organisations such as Girl's Brigade, Beavers and Cubs. These are all locally available. Milly (7) had been on her first camping trip with Beavers recently. It was only for one night at a local site, but she had really enjoyed her time there. Aidan (8) plays football for a local team

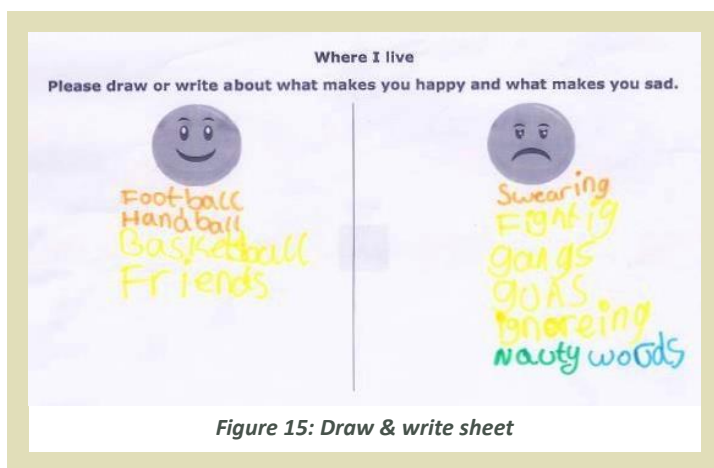


Figure 15: Draw & write sheet

and had recently attended a tournament at a local university. He wants to be a footballer when he grows up because 'footballers are rich'. For many of these children, taking part in these activities was one of their favourite things about their life in the local area, and this was reflected in their responses to draw and write activities.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Discussion with the child revealed that the reference to 'gangs' in Figure 15 did not relate to worries around gangs in the local area, but to more general fears around terrorism and violence in society.

A few of the children did not attend any out-of school activities, and some were unable to attend everything that they wanted to. There were two main reasons that were given by parents for this. First was the cost of the activities. One family mentioned a summer school for young footballers that ran during the holidays: *'There is like football academies that the children can go to, under 8 or 8-10, but that costs, it is like £9, £10 a day. So even if you do find something, it can be quite expensive as a family'*. Others stated that their children were currently too tired after school to attend organised activities in the evenings, but it was something that they would consider doing in the future.

*'even if you do find something, it can be quite expensive as a family'*

There were two other issues raised in terms of accessing activities for primary-aged children. Firstly, Settled families often did not find anything suitable locally and would travel to other areas to access particular sports clubs or groups. Secondly, families pointed out that there were quite a lot of family activities available in the summer holidays, but far less at other times of the year. Leila for instance, a local mum who the research team met at an event during the school summer holidays, thought it would be nice to have family activities throughout the year; for example a fireworks display or a Christmas party.

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#### AMENITIES FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL-AGE YOUNG PEOPLE

In contrast to the younger age groups, far fewer young people attended organised activities. Most people living and working in the area felt that there was little for this age group to do. There is a youth service that operates in Kingshurst, but we were not able to access this, nor did we meet any young people who attended it.

A few young people continued to attend groups and activities that they started when they were younger, such as Girl's Brigade and Scouts, but mostly they hung around with friends in each other's homes. Tom (13) liked playing on his X-Box and would play on his own or against friends. He had never been to the youth club. Leanne (16) also mainly spends time with her friends in each other's houses. One of her friend's lives in Shard End but the other two are close by. None of the young people we spoke to said that they spent time hanging out in the parks or around the local streets although, as detailed earlier, this was a common complaint about young people in the area.

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#### CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Both professionals and families told us of the difficulties for families with children with disabilities or additional needs, and these issues were confirmed in the discussions at the

Interim Workshop. In addition to the poorly regarded local GP service, there are long waits for assessment, diagnosis and treatment for children with a range of issues. Speech and language services, support for children on the autistic spectrum and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) were named as particularly problematic. Professionals told us:

*'At the strategic level it keeps being talked about and talked about. I used to receive the review from the Children and Young People's Trust Board and it would always mention the lack of speech and language therapy and lack of CAMHS. But nothing ever happened. It's flagged but then no action is taken'.*

The long wait for assessment and lack of appropriate services after diagnosis was very stressful for families. They were worried about their children's future and some found it difficult to cope. As one parent explained:

*'months later, that assessment hasn't been done, and I think, until it has been done, nothing actually gets put into place'*

*'In the meantime it is just a wait, and in the meantime, I have got my child whose behaviour is really bad and it is disrupting everything. And months later, that assessment hasn't been done, and I think, until it has been done, nothing actually gets put into place'.*

Issues with some schools exacerbated the problems and they were criticised as not taking the concerns of parents seriously and not offering the support that children with additional needs required:

*'My eldest daughter is 10, and they have only just told me that she has got problems. She has been ignored. I think she has been ignored for the last 7 years, since she was 3. She has to go and see a paediatrician (...) and they are saying that she has got [disability], which means that she is only just now going to get support. But I told the school from day one (...) if they see any problems to let me know'.*

This perceived failure by schools was linked by many parents to the stigmatization of families in the area. Families felt that their knowledge of their own child and their behaviour was not taken into consideration. In addition, it was believed that well-behaved children were largely ignored when they struggled and that it was only the children who were disruptive that schools paid attention to: *'if they are not shouting and screaming (...) throwing furniture round the school, then it is like you are just swept underneath the carpet. It is actually pathetic'*. Children who are not having their

*'if they are not shouting and screaming ... throwing furniture round the school, then it is like you are just swept underneath the carpet'*

needs met are at risk of not reaching their educational potential, as well as temporary or permanent exclusion. Parents and professionals shared these concerns.

Whilst there are a number of strong community support organisations active locally, they do not currently have the capacity to support all the families who might benefit from their help in the way that they would want to: *'For our capacity I think we are engaging with lots, but I*

*'For our capacity I think we are engaging with lots, but I think there's always more to do'*

*think there's always more to do'*. Some local organisations have waiting lists for particular activities such as disability swimming groups. There is also a lack of childcare options for children and young people with disabilities, especially as they get older. One local child-minder told us:

*'I used to look after a disabled lad - he was 17, severely disabled. There were transport issues because he was 17 and classed as an adult. They couldn't bring him to me, and the parents were going to be charged £300 for transport. His Dad had to cut his hours at work and he couldn't stay with me'.*

Many support services are out of the area and there are issues around access. Using public transport when you have a disabled child is not always possible and some families are reported to be isolated. At the Interim Workshop, we were told that *'support groups are often in the South [of Solihull borough] or in the evening, and it is impossible to attend due to childcare or transport issues'*.

Overall, many families felt that stigmatization in the area meant that parents were often blamed for children's problematic behaviour and this led to delays in assessment and a lack of support after diagnosis. Many families felt that some professionals had such low expectations of families in North Solihull that educational underachievement or challenging behaviour was accepted and not investigated in the way that it would be in a more affluent area. Navigating the system and knowing what support your child was entitled to could be very problematic, particularly on the transition to adult services at 16. Many professionals were also worried that the rushed implementation of the new Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans would mean that they would not meet the children and young people's needs, thus making it even more difficult for children and young people with disabilities or additional needs *'to meet their potential'*.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### DEVELOPING KINGSHURST AND THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Whilst it is clear from this research that many families in Kingshurst are disadvantaged, there are considerable differences in how disadvantage is experienced between Established, Settled and Transitory families. This means that one single plan is unlikely to meet all of the community's needs. Many of the problems families encounter are structural in nature - they result from the poor housing and low income of many local residents. These issues cannot be resolved without changes in government policy. Increased investment in NHS resources by the local Clinical Commissioning Group could make a difference, although given the current cuts in NHS funding they may not have much scope to improve services.

### DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE

In relation to local infrastructure, improvements to parks and the built environment would benefit the local community, although, as detailed in earlier sections of this report, there is some debate locally as to what any improvement might look like, particularly with regards to the Parade. Families would also benefit from increased indoor play provision, particularly if it was suitable for a range of ages in order to be more readily accessible to families with children in multiple age brackets. The community would benefit from increased provision for young people, which may in turn have a positive impact on reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. Support for children and young people with disabilities or additional needs also needs to be increased substantially, ideally by utilising the existing expertise of local groups who already have strong relationships with families in the area, and building the capacity of these groups to support more families.

### DEVELOPING CAPACITY IN THE LOCAL VOLUNTARY SECTOR

This issue of having a limited capacity is important for many of the local voluntary or not-for-profit organisations that we encountered in the course of the research. Most recognised that there was more that they could be doing in the local area, but they simply did not have the resources to accomplish this – a situation that had been exacerbated by the political climate of austerity and subsequent cuts to local authority funding of the voluntary sector. This situation could possibly be improved through making greater support available for such organisations to apply for charitable grant funding. An interview with a regional officer at a

national charitable grant-making body revealed that for some years, funders active in the West Midlands region had considered North Solihull a priority area for grant funding due to its high levels of disadvantage. However, the area remained under-funded when compared to other areas in the region with similar deprivation levels.

The officer felt that this was due to a lack of voluntary sector infrastructure, which meant that local groups did not always get enough support in submitting funding bids, and which made it difficult for funders to tap into local networks in order to promote grant schemes and build relationships with potential applicants. We were told that the Solihull CVS [Community and Voluntary Service] had its funding cut prior to the post-2010 austerity programme, in part because it was failing to adequately support organisations working in the north of the borough. Two other umbrella organisations, SUSTAiN (based in the south of the borough) and The Colebridge Trust (based in Chelmsley Wood) now aim to provide support and development services for Solihull's voluntary sector, and there is also an active North Solihull Voluntary and Community Alliance (NSVCA) of which several of the local community and voluntary organisations we spoke to are members. However, the officer we interviewed felt that there were currently inadequate links and relationships between these bodies and networks of funders in the region, which hindered funders' ability to attract high quality grant applications from the area.

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## ADDRESSING STIGMA

One of the most important findings in this project was the extent of stigma that families experienced. Many families had been directly discriminated against or felt patronised by some local professionals. Others told us that they had been ignored by some professionals when they tried to raise concerns about their children, and they thought that this was due to low expectations of how families living in the area could be expected to behave, and what their children could achieve. During the course of the fieldwork we observed several comments and incidents which were discriminatory or patronising. The same professionals were often the ones to blame parents for a lack of aspirations for their children. This is in sharp contrast to the attitude of the families we spoke to, who were all clear about the importance of education and wanted their children to succeed in future careers.

The impact of discrimination, stigma and high levels of surveillance of families means that many are distrustful of some local services. Additionally, in a community like Kingshurst, where some residents are embedded in dense local networks of relatives and friends, news of a negative experience of a service or a particular professional, and subsequently distrust, spreads quickly. We were told by a number of professionals that when families' trust of a service breaks down, it is a very difficult and lengthy process to build trust up again. It is thus extremely important that any move to increase local connections between services



does not heighten the sense of prejudice or unwarranted surveillance felt by families, as this could mean that they cease to use services all together.

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## INTER-SERVICE WORKING AND RELATIONSHIPS

The data in our project revealed that some organisations and services in Kingshurst work together better than others. Many of the more locally based organisations are part of a strong social network and regularly make referrals between each other in order to support local people and community activities. Within this network are some voluntary organisations, but also some key professionals at public sector organisations. Many of these organisations and individuals are active participants in the NSVCA. We would categorise these organisations as insider organisations.

Other organisations active in the area were not really part of this network. In some cases, these organisations had been invited to participate in NSVCA or other local networks or working groups, and had either declined or, reportedly, attended no or few meetings. We found that these organisations did not always work with others, made fewer referrals and did not necessary know about what other services were on offer locally, sometimes resulting in duplication. We would categorise these organisations as outsider organisations.

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## DEVELOPING A CHILDREN AND FAMILY ZONE

In the course of interviews with the research team, some professionals did discuss the development of a Children and Family Zone in the area. Many of the insider organisations were sceptical about what it would add to what they were already doing. Some have had previous experience with outsider organisations starting to work in the area, and sometimes taking over local services and damaging the viability of existing providers. Whilst The Children's Society had been in contact with a number of local services and organisations, many said that they had not experienced any meaningful consultation. In a meeting with representatives from several organisations, it was agreed by the informants that the interaction was really a 'sales pitch' and that their reservations had not been listened to.

The development of the Children and Family Zone is at an early stage, so some of the details that the local organisations might have expected may not actually be in place yet. Nevertheless if a Children and Family Zone is to be successful in uniting partners within a single strategy for the area, then considerably more dialogue needs to take place, and the knowledge and experience of insider organisations could be usefully placed at the centre of the development plans.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We also wish to thank Holly Ryan for her valuable assistance with transcription and analysis of the data.

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## APPENDIX: EVIDENCE SUMMARY

### EVIDENCE SUMMARY FOR THE STUDY: FAMILIES LIVING IN DISADVANTAGE IN NORTH SOLIHULL

PAM LOWE, DEMELZA JONES, KAREN WEST & CRISPIAN FULLER, ASTON UNIVERSITY  
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#### OVERVIEW

This document contains a summary of key parts of the existing research into families living in disadvantage within the UK. The review has primarily focused on understanding disadvantage from the perspectives of the communities themselves, although this has been supplemented with other evidence which we feel is important. This report is structured around three main areas which will be used to inform the subsequent fieldwork:

- Friends and family
- My home(s)
- Where I live

Within these areas, there are a number of key ideas that are important in understanding the impact of disadvantage across different places and relationships. These are defined below.

#### POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In the existing literature, poverty and social exclusion can be defined in different ways. For the purposes of this summary, we have accepted each author's definition.

Within this research project, we have adopted the EU definition of poverty that includes an understanding of social exclusion:

*'People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live. Because of their poverty they may experience multiple disadvantages through unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate health care and barriers to lifelong learning, culture, sport and recreation. They are often excluded and marginalised from participating in activities (economic, social and cultural) that are the norm for other people and their access to fundamental rights may be restricted'. (Eurostat 2010)*

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### *RISK AND VULNERABILITY*

Within the area of child protection, a child 'at risk' is one that is considered to be potentially harmed in physical, sexual, emotional way, or not provided with proper care. Consequently, there is a tendency to understand the term risk as implying a negative situation.

An alternative meaning of risk is an assessment of the balance of probabilities, and there is a growing recognition that children's independence can be threatened by environments that seek to eliminate all risks.

Within this research, we will use the term 'vulnerable' to describe situations that are most likely to be harmful to children (e.g. poor housing) and the term 'risk' when there are a range of positive and negative possibilities that need to be assessed (e.g. street-based play).

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### *SOCIAL CAPITAL, RESOURCES AND RESILIENCE*

There are different definitions of social capital, although they all try to explain the effect of networks of social co-operation amongst people with shared norms and values. Whilst many aspects of social capital are positive, it is also important to remember that they can be exclusionary. In some cases the network can act to ensure only a small group of people benefits. In other cases, people do not participate, which can perpetuate marginalisation.

By 'resources' we mean not just material wealth, but also other resources like social capital. A key element will be considering what these resources are, and how they might account for the differing impact of similar economic positioning. Although they are often related, resources can be described as the 'sum' of the socio-economic position, whereas resilience is when these can be positively drawn on to overcome negative experiences.

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### *FAMILY AND FRIENDS*

Whilst exact definitions of wellbeing vary, most include an assessment of the quality of relationships (Dex and Hollingworth 2012). Research has found that children consider the relationship with their parents to be of primary importance, with friends and wider family of secondary importance (Dex and Hollingworth 2012). Living in disadvantage can negatively impact on these relationships in a number of different ways. Lack of money clearly has an economic impact, and children and families can struggle to participate in social activities (Ridge 2011). However, it also has an emotional dimension for both parents and children that can undermine confidence and self-esteem (Ridge 2011).

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### *PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIPS*

The evidence suggests that many children and young people are very aware of financial difficulties that their families might be facing (Ridge 2009, Walker 2008). They often try to mitigate the impact of these by limiting the demands that they make on parents for treats and leisure activities (Wager et al 2010). Parents also find not being able to provide for their children in the way that they want difficult (Gillies 2007) and often do everything they can to ensure their children do not lose out (Seaman 2006).

In current policy, work is seen as the main route out of poverty, but this has implications for parent/child relationships. Whilst work might secure additional income, it can reduce the time spent as a family and involve the use of childcare. In Gillies' (2007) study some women felt strongly that 'being there' for their children was more important than the small financial gain they would make through working. Millar and Ridge (2009) found that when lone mothers entered the workforce the whole family often got involved in sustaining employment through sharing of chores and young people taking increasing responsibility for themselves and siblings. Yet when mother's work led to degradation in family life, through low pay, employment insecurity or unsatisfactory childcare arrangements, children and young people are at risk of losing confidence in the value of work (Ridge 2009).

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### *EXTENDED FAMILY AND ADULT SUPPORT NETWORKS*

The extended family can be a strong source of support for families living in disadvantage. Extended family members can help children and young people financially through giving them money or paying for things that parents are unable to provide (Wager et al 2010). They can also help with other resources such as giving lifts or providing alternative spaces for play (Wager et al 2010). Parents often find practical and emotional support from extended family and friends, and this could be in reciprocal arrangements (Gillies 2007). However, it needs to be remembered that not all support is received positively by parents and the balance between help and interference can be a concern (Ghate and Hazel 2002).

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### *CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S FRIENDSHIPS*

Having friends is an important element in the wellbeing of children, and living in disadvantage can have a negative impact on children and young people's ability to make and support friendships. Walker et al's (2008) study found that children living in poor housing can be reluctant to invite friends to their home and that older children face exclusion from social groups if they are unable to attend outings or afford the right branded

clothing. Wager et al (2010) found that some children often sought to make excuses to their friends to avoid having to say that money was the issue. Others tried to support each other to access leisure services, but this carried a risk of being stigmatized. As Sutton's (2009) research found, whilst children understand different positioning in relation to wealth, they can be reluctant to identify themselves as poor.

Not all relationships between young people are supportive and bullying has been identified as a particular issue for children and young people living in poverty who wear the wrong clothes or are perceived as different (Ridge 2002). In some areas, issues of territory can impact on the use of public spaces. Having a defined area and social group can make children and young people's feel safer within a territorial space, but can restrict their movements in other places (Day and Wager 2010).

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## MY HOME(S)

Changes to family structure mean that increasingly children are spending time in different households and it is important to recognise that this diversity in family life can mean that children have more than one place they consider home. Previous research has identified that some children are frequently sleeping in different places when parents separate and different family members offer childcare (Williams et al 2007). Indeed whilst family is often used in policy to denote people living in the same household, in practice families are much more loosely defined (Morris 2013).

Children living in disadvantage are much more likely to live in poorer quality rented accommodation than the general population, especially those from minority ethnic groups (Quilgars 2011). Problems with housing include a lack of space (particularly for larger families), issues with damp and inadequate heating (Adelman 2003). Lack of space in the home can leave little room for play (Sutton 2008) and can mean a lack of quiet space for homework (Walker et al 2008).

Ridge (2011) reports that insufficient heating led to children being cold, sleeping badly and having other health issues. Homelessness, in particular, causes family disruption, and moves into and out of temporary accommodation can disrupt friendships and schooling (Nettleton 2001). Poor housing situations can also exacerbate the ability to eat healthily (Ridge 2011) and whilst poverty is associated with poorer diets, Shaw (2012) found that the unemployed had a slightly better diet than the working poor. The reasons for this need to be fully investigated, however, she suggest that poorly paid employment means the small gains in finances are offset by time constraints. Fairbrother et al's (2012) research found that children and young people understand a need to eat healthily, although this was strongly associated with the consumption of fruit and vegetables. They also have a strong awareness

of how financial constraints impact on food consumption as well as the hierarchies of supermarkets in terms of quality and price.

Children living in disadvantaged circumstances are more likely to have responsibilities in the home than those living in more affluent households (Muschamp 2009). A study in Australia found that poorer parents saw children's work in the home as an essential part of making them independent and fostering resilience (Taket et al 2014). Home can also offer a place of safety, especially for minority-ethnic families at risk of racist abuse (Morrow 2000).

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## WHERE I LIVE

Access to public space is an essential part of children and young people's lives, especially for outdoor play (Gleave and Cole-Hamilton 2012). Gleave and Cole-Hamilton's (2012) review found that playing in the neighbourhood increases attachment to places and reduces anti-social behaviour, although this is not often recognised by adults who may see children and young people in public spaces as a threat. The importance of unstructured play rather than organised activities is also highlighted, although this may be less of an issue for children living in poverty who are much less likely to take part activities out of school hours (Wikeley et al 2009).

Children living in poverty often struggle to use leisure services due to direct and indirect costs. Direct costs that they struggle with include the costs of the activity (e.g. entrance fees, membership) as well as indirect costs (e.g. equipment, refreshments) (Wager et al 2010). Transport can be a major barrier for families either because of cost, or due to public transport journeys being infrequent or difficult to make on a regular basis, especially for sporting activities such as football, when teams may play matches in different places (Muschamp 2009). Children and young people spoke of the importance of free local services (Wager et al 2010) although as disengagement from school is more common in less affluent children (Horgan 2009), and attending breakfast and after-school clubs can be stigmatising (Ridge 2009), structured activities at school may not always be welcomed.

Being out with friends in public spaces is thus important for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Day and Wager (2010) found that children and young people stated that parks were really important, and their use changed over time. Going to the park with friends was frequently a step in growing independence for younger children, and teenagers still use parks to hang out with friends even when they had grown out of playground equipment (Day and Wager (2010). Children and young people also use streets, alleys and forecourts as places to socialise, but could be wary of dark or overgrown spaces which were littered or vandalised (Day and Wager 2010).

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## SUMMARY

This evidence summary has resulted in a number of key areas for consideration in the research:

- Definitions of family and home(s) need to be made by the informants themselves.
- Understanding the material issues of different families (income, housing, food etc.) and how they are shaped by the local neighbourhood will be an important element.
- The employment status of parents is an importance element of family life, but the quality of work and potential negative impact of paid employment on family life need to be investigated.
- The ability of children and young people to make and sustain friendships and be active in the community and/or public spaces needs to be fully understood.
- Full consideration of family support mechanisms (formal and informal) need to be investigated, but it cannot be assumed support is always welcomed.
- Space is an important consideration, both in and outside of the home.

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