Riverside

Challenging Times, Changing Lives

Executive Summary
Phase 5

Transforming **lives**
Revitalising **neighbourhoods**

Challenging Times, Changing Lives

In the summer of 2012 Riverside began a three-year longitudinal study tracking the lives and experiences of 20 tenants in three areas – Carlisle, Wirral and South London. The objective is to understand in detail how tenants, who are mainly on lower incomes, respond to financial change through a period of austerity and major welfare benefits reform. How their lives are affected and what the drivers are which affect the choices they make. What this means for social landlords, and what the wider implications are for housing and welfare policy.

This summary is the fifth in a series of six-monthly updates. It follows on from the baseline report, tracking tenants' progress and focuses on:

- financial circumstances
- impact of under-occupation penalty
- wider welfare benefits reform
- work, skills and health.

Introduction

This report is a summary of the findings from the fifth set of interviews and charts the progress of households in summer 2014 in the penultimate interview. Two of the households have moved to smaller properties and are no longer Riverside tenants. The first participant has moved because of the under-occupation charge, the second participant and her husband have downsized due to health issues. Both continue to participate in the study.

Participants have been asked to record household income and expenditure and complete household budget questionnaires every six months. This data has been analysed and referred to within this report.

Summary

The gap between the highest and lowest household incomes has narrowed by 26% in the last six months. The restoration of full benefit entitlement following breaks in payments and the late award of Discretionary Housing Payments has narrowed the growing schism between the 'struggling to get by' group and the other two groups of householders ('managing to get by' and 'comfortably off' groups). Even though benefit payments are eventually restored and entitlement backdated, claimants have built up additional charges and financial penalties for missed payments on household bills and debts, pushing them further into debt. Although we have seen improvements in the financial and personal circumstances of a few householders, this has not resulted in any changes to the component groups.

Expenditure has risen by 6% overall but this increase is almost totally driven by the uptake of new debts. One third of households have acquired new debts in the last six months with a median new debt of £340. The majority of new debt was acquired by participants in the 'managing to get by' group (82%). Less than a quarter of new debt was from informal sources such as borrowing cash from family or friends or on their store cards. The majority was unsecured debt including 'buy-backs' to pawnbrokers, credit cards and overdrafts.

The concentration of new debt in the 'managing to get by' group is alarming. Given interest rates are expected to rise within the next twelve months, there is a lack of built-in flexibility in this group's household income and almost total absence of financial planning and protection.

For all but the 'comfortably off', saving remains mostly informal; jam jars and tins, averaging less than £2 per week per household. The majority of participants (with the exception of the 'comfortably off') have less than one or two weeks' income to fall back on if they were to lose their job or encounter unexpected expenses.

The employment prospects of working age householders continue to improve with over half now in employment. However the poor quality of terms and conditions of employment is becoming an increasingly significant issue. One third of working age households include a spouse employed on a casual or temporary employment contract. The increasing popularity of flexible working has benefited some workers but the trend towards zero-hours contracts and the use of umbrella companies by recruitment agencies has also had a negative impact on net wages and erratic incomes make it difficult for families to budget effectively. The experiences of householders in this study reveal a wide range of deductions from pay, including management fees, commission, uniforms, associated courses fees and variations from advertised hourly pay rates.

Poor health and/or the deterioration in existing health conditions of participants or their spouses over the course of this study has so often counteracted the progress participants have made in other key areas of their lives, such as finance and work. Over half of working participants have kept medical conditions or new episodes in pre-existing conditions, particularly mental conditions such as depression, from employers out of fear for the impact on their employment prospects and job security.

Household income

The spread of incomes now ranges from £799.20 to £2,691 a month.[1] The significant reduction in the gap is attributable to an increase in income at the lower end of the scale as a result of:

- the restoration of benefits after the suspension of payments due to sanctions or change of circumstances leading to a break in the claim
- late award of Discretionary Housing Payments to cover the loss of Housing Benefit income to householders paying the under-occupation charge largely benefiting the 'struggling to get by' group
- the award of a living assistance grant helped with the cost of moving home for a participant impacted by the under-occupation charge.

"I'm still struggling. I'm finding it still pretty hard to juggle things around but once I've managed to do it then I feel a bit proud of myself that I can do it. I think it's like putting certain money aside for certain things I still find hard to do, you know, paying bills, and I still struggle with that type of thing. But I'm lucky, I mean my son will help me. If I get stuck I can ask him to help me and show me what I've done wrong and then I can go from there sort of thing and then try and work it all out again. But I still struggle very hard."

Elaine (53), Wirral

1. Including Housing Benefit support and Council Tax reduction/support.

The median monthly income of participants has risen by 10% to an average £1,093 per month. In real terms this means one third of participants in the study have a monthly income below the Government's relative low income threshold (£1,056 per month or 60% below the national median income £1,760 before housing costs). In addition to the reasons mentioned above, this improvement is attributable to:

- increase in number of householders gaining income from full-time employment
- modest pay rises. Where there were pay rises, for the two-thirds of participants in employment, they ranged from 1% to 1.5% and largely benefited the 'managing to get by' group. There was one exception in which a participant received a 20% pay rise following a job review, though this was subsequently subject to a company-wide pay cut of 10% for all workers
- severance payment. The income of one household benefited from a net gain of £8,000 when higher paid employment was secured within weeks of agreeing a severance payment from previous employers
- the on-going inflation-linked increases in state pensions benefited the pensioners in the study.

There continues to be a positive movement in the overall number of households deriving their primary income from wages or earnings from self-employment (just over half). There has been a slight fall in the number of households in employment dependent on in-work benefits, such as tax credits, to top up income (just under half), largely attributable to higher wages. The remaining working age households are unable to work due to ill-health and are in receipt of disability benefits.

The impact of non-dependent children on household incomes varies significantly. On the one hand, this resulted in an additional £400 a month coming into one household. On the other hand, the loss of child-related benefits and application of non-dependent deductions, where older children are either unemployed or part-time workers (and unable to make contributions), have been a drain on three families' finances.

Expenditure and debt

Median monthly expenditure increased by 6% over the last six months, lower than the median increase in incomes. Participants in the 'managing to get by' group accounted for the majority of increased spending. Spending on cars (MOTs, repairs or deposits on second hand cars), the replacement of white goods (mostly ovens and washing machines) and uptake of extended warranties were primarily responsible for increases in expenditure. Attempts to reduce spending on non-essentials such as satellite and broadband contracts have been thwarted in a number of cases by terms and conditions which tie the householder in for extended periods. The most common methods of cost cutting remain reducing spending on clothes and food.

With regards to core expenditure:

Winter fuel bills – the average fuel bill has reduced by just over a third from a median £116 per month over the winter months to £72 over the summer months. The group to benefit most from the reduction was the 'comfortably off', however the average spend of the 'struggling to get by' group remained largely unchanged reflecting a pre-winter loading strategy on pre-payment cards. Changing energy providers as a strategy to reduce bills was taken up by just one householder in Carlisle though he remained vague about projected savings.

Rent balances – just over half the participants now have a credit balance on their rent accounts, a slight improvement on six months ago. Rent balances range from £330 credit to £480 arrears. The number of participants owing more than £200 arrears has reduced. Two of the five households, with over £200 arrears six months ago, have reduced their arrears by 33% and 16%. A minority of tenants are struggling to pay their rent. In one case, a single householder impacted by the under-occupation charge, arrears rose by 65% in the last six months to £480. This has resulted in the launch of formal eviction proceedings.

"We help each other out, my son and I, it works both ways. I helped him out last week. He'd put his computer in the pawnbrokers and when he wants it back he has to pay double the amount. He was a little bit stuck but the computer's got all of the baby's photos on from when he was born so I helped him out so he could get it back."

Elaine (53), Wirral

Debts – one third of households have acquired new debts in the last six months with a median of £340. The majority of new debt was acquired by participants in the 'managing to get by' group (82%). Less than a quarter of new debt was informal through borrowing cash from family or their store cards (ranging from small amounts to a £1,000 deposit for a mobility car). The majority was unsecured debt including 'buy-backs' to pawnbrokers, credit cards and overdrafts. Notwithstanding this new debt, overall, the last twelve months have seen a significant drop in the median debt (known to participants) from £2,100 last summer to £805. This improvement is largely due to two householders in South London clearing long standing debts.

A householder who received a substantial severance payment (£8,000) from her previous employment secured a new job with an enhanced salary within three months and was able to clear £6,000 of debt freeing up an estimated £370 a month in repayment fees.

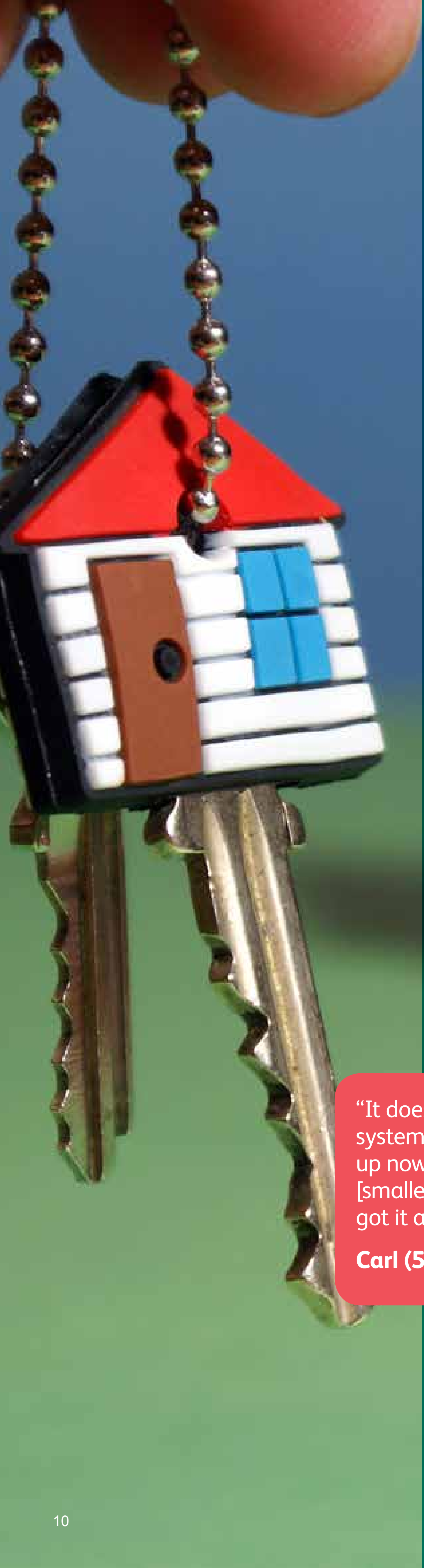
A second householder who returned to paid employment in the last months after a long period of unemployment has continued to reduce historical debts from £2,500 to under £500.

In spite of the overall improvement there are a number of areas of concern and warning signs for the future.

- A quarter of households admit to missing at least one payment on a household bill in the last six months. Most commonly TV, internet or telephone but for those on disability benefits, it is water bills or rent.
- A pensioner acquired a new credit card and has quickly racked up a £900 debt (holiday and MOT) and his monthly debt repayments have increased from £30 a month to £160 a month. His only income is a small private and state pension.
- Two householders in Carlisle who have moved and lost track of personal debt, are failing to make any repayments and remain in fear of debts catching up with them and the inevitable court proceedings.

Saving remains mostly informal, jam jars and tins, averaging less than £8 per month per household. For the 'comfortably off' group monthly savings average £140. The majority of participants have less than one to two weeks' income to fall back on. There is a growing schism in the outlook of the three groups, with the 'struggling to get by' and the 'managing to get by' groups increasingly pessimistic about the state of their finances and the financial pressures they will face over the next six months. In contrast the 'comfortably off' group are increasingly optimistic about their finances.

> "If anything I am a little better off because one week I use the credit card to pay a bill and that keeps me some money in the bank. I am robbing Peter to pay Paul but who isn't. I think everyone lives on bloody credit these days. It's more or less the same."
>
> **Eric (68), Carlisle**



Under-occupation penalty

Sixteen months after the introduction of the under-occupation charge, only one of six households under-occupying has downsized to a smaller property. Two other householders who had been considering downsizing have, decided to stay and pay after receiving Discretionary Housing Payments, joining a fourth householder who is severely disabled and has never considered moving. The remaining two under-occupiers continue to search property-swapping websites but they have become disillusioned with the lack of suitable properties and their efforts are little more than intermittent searches.

For the successful downsizer, the move has resulted in higher Housing Benefit entitlement but the moving costs associated (removal van, decorating and new oven) have pushed his finances further into the red.

"It does work this Property Pool [local choice based lettings system] but it's frustrating. You can't say I will start packing up now because you don't know if you are going to get them [smaller properties]. You are in limbo until they say you haven't got it and then you start the whole search again."

Carl (56), Wirral

At the start of the study Andrew had been living in a two bedroom home for the past 12 years, but with the introduction of the under-occupation charge in April 2014 his Housing Benefit entitlement was reduced by 14% (equal to £10.98 a week on his weekly rent of £79). Eight months after registering on property swap websites he successfully bid for a nearby one bedroom property. He is now entitled to full Housing Benefit. The rent on his new one bedroom home is equivalent to the rent on his former home (£79) but he now receives £10.98 per week more in Housing Benefit.

Although Andrew gave the required four weeks' notice on his former home, he was required to pay two weeks' rent on his new home in advance. The move has therefore resulted in rent arrears on his former home (£158), plus additional charges incurred for leaving behind white goods, resulting in further rent arrears and charges of £208.

Sudden and unplanned changes in family circumstances highlight the difficulties divorced and separated families are faced with when 'spare' rooms are used in the assessment of Housing Benefit entitlement. Following a disagreement with his father, Pauline's 17 year old son returned to live with her, but it is not yet clear how long he'll stay or if it will become a more permanent arrangement. Therefore until she notifies authorities of the change in circumstance, the 'spare' bedroom continues to exact an under-occupation charge.

For the other households, the cumulative financial and emotional burden of under-occupying is exacting a heavy price. After submitting bids for smaller properties and/or applications for Discretionary Housing Payments, they have faced long periods, particularly with the latter, awaiting the outcome. They continue to struggle to make up the shortfall in rent and in one case no payments have been made since the start of the year. Even when Discretionary Housing Payment applications (in two cases) have been successful, and large backdated payments received, the stress of waiting whilst rent arrears build up has taken a toll on their mental wellbeing.

The median rent arrears of under-occupying householders have increased by 18% to £126.40 in the intervening six months. But this figure hides a growing divide between those awarded a Discretionary Housing Payment, median arrears £33, and those still awaiting the outcome of applications or who have had an application rejected, median arrears £335. Two participants have recently been sent warning letters over the level of arrears. One of the householders has failed to make up any payments towards the £25 per week shortfall in rent, as what little disposable income he has is diverted to providing a new school uniform for his son.

Work and skills

The employment prospects of working age householders continue to improve with over half of householders now in employment. Of these, two-thirds are in full-time employment, the remainder in part-time employment, of whom all but one are seeking more, full-time, hours.

In South London, the youngest participant has finally found a long-term position with an agency as a hotel receptionist after two years of being stuck in a low pay-no pay cycle of temporary work and unemployment. He is continuing to develop his online fashion business and is investing earnings from his day job into marketing and advertising. He is more optimistic about the future of the business and is weighing up the feasibility of establishing a shop in South East London.

"From a £350 flat rate that I'd been paid that week, I ended up only getting £261 paid into my account... And then I had to wait to get my wage slip and there were all these deductions. I have to pay an umbrella company to pay me, what? It's my own wages! I had to pay them a flat rate £20 fee then I had to pay them quite a lot in so called commission. I just thought I'm not having this. It says that they [the umbrella company] become your employers, not the school itself, and I was like well why, would I pay them? No-one else pays their employers to work each week…"

Sarah (52), Brixton

Two participants are now being paid a Living Wage (£7.65 per hour), only one of the participants is now paid the National Minimum Wage (£6.50).

- In Wirral, a participant was awarded a 20% pay increase following a job review but a company-wide 10% pay cut subsequently reduced this.
- A single parent on a medical suspension was offered a severance agreement by her employers shortly before a planned return to work. After three months agency work, she secured a permanent job in a more senior position on a higher salary. (See Sarah's story, opposite)

In Carlisle, a participant who returned to work following a long period of ill-health and depression was forced to give up a part-time cleaning job as she struggled to cope with severe eczema.

One-third of working age households includes a spouse employed on casual or temporary employment contract. The increasing popularity of flexible working has benefits for workers but the trend towards zero-hours contracts and the use of umbrella companies by recruitment agencies can have a negative impact on wages and job security. The experiences of householders in the study reveal deductions from pay for management fees, commission, uniforms, courses and random hours and erratic incomes associated with zero-hours.

In May, shortly before a planned return to work, Sarah (who had been on a medical suspension from work following a serious illness two years ago) was offered a severance agreement by her employers. Within a matter of weeks she had secured a temporary to permanent contract providing one-to-one classroom support at a local school. She was unaware that the recruitment agency would not be responsible for her employment contract and instead an umbrella company[2] would manage the administration of the contract and payment of wages. She became increasingly dissatisfied at the lack of transparency regarding the lower than advertised hourly rate of pay, the inclusion of a 'management fee' (£20) and 'commission' deducted from wages (varied between 7-10% of gross wages) by the umbrella company.[2] With just one week before the end of term, she was informed that she would not be required to come back in September for the new term. She has now secured a full-time job.

Lisa's partner Mark has been working as a security guard on a zero-hours contract for the last 18 months. Whilst the hours have been relatively stable the working pattern is non-negotiable, 13 hours two days on and two days off for which he is paid the National Minimum Wage (£6.50). He is struggling to manage the hours but as work is not guaranteed from day to day his family cannot rely on a regular income.

2. An umbrella company is an employment service provider that acts as an employer to contractors who are in a contracted assignment, usually through a recruitment agency.

After-school club manager Sharon continues to provide financial support to two of her older children due to the financial precariousness of their jobs. Her younger son, who lives at home, started a sports apprenticeship last year. With a weekly wage of just £80 he struggles to cover his living expenses. The apprenticeship is grant-funded by a local school but his employers have failed to pay his wages into his bank account on numerous occasions and he has had to wait several weeks, chasing them before full payment is received. On other occasions, deductions for an NVQ training course have been taken without warning.

Sharon also has to help her oldest son out financially, Ralph works in an abattoir on a zero-hours contract. He is not guaranteed work and the hours he tends to be offered are evening shifts that finish at midnight. He travels a considerable distance to work in North Wales on public transport and routinely gets there to be told the previous shift has finished the day's work so they don't need him. He finds it difficult to support his young family and is forced to turn to his mother for financial assistance.

Samuel in South London has just secured a long-term job as a hotel administrator through an agency and although the wages are above the Living Wage, he has to pay the costs of his uniform and other 'extras'.

Alison's son Sam completed his first year at university before deferring for two years, due to ill-health, and returning to the family home. He has found work in a local pub on a zero-hours contract. He finds it difficult to budget and plan from week to week as the hours offered tend to be erratic and unsociable. His mother continues to offer ad-hoc financial support.

The remaining working age householders are on Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and/or disability benefits. Whilst there remains little prospect of a return to paid work within the next 12 months for the majority, there have been some positive developments for two households on disability benefits.

In Wirral, a former care worker has completed an adult literacy course and has started another course on mental health. She has also enrolled on a Basic Computer Skills course and has applied for voluntary work at an animal rescue centre. The return to education has not just provided her with basic skills and learning, it has boosted her self-confidence and opened up new work opportunities now that she can no longer cope with the physical demands of care work.

In Carlisle, a disabled participant has gained confidence and purpose from a developing partnership with schools in which he shares his experiences of the dangers of cars, alcohol and drugs. Over the summer he has been busy working with his support worker to book appointments in for the new school term.

The monetary value and contribution to society of pensioners who volunteer in their local communities and community groups goes largely unacknowledged but this study highlights the many positive impacts.

In Carlisle, Eric, 67, volunteers one day a week in the local credit union, spends another half a day volunteering at the tenant resource centre, and has recently started working three days a week for the local county council driving elderly and vulnerable tenants to hospitals and daycentres (for which he receives petrol expenses).

In Wirral, Rose, 69, helps organise trips, provide transport, and raise funds for the local majorettes troupe. in which her foster children participate.

Health and wellbeing

Poor health and/or deterioration in pre-existing health conditions of participants or their spouses over the course of this study has so often counteracted the progress participants have made in other key areas of their lives, such as finance and work.

Over half the working participants still have medical conditions or have had new episodes in pre-existing conditions (particularly mental conditions, such as depression) and have kept these from employers out of fear for the impact on their employment prospects and job security.

In London a female in her 40s who recently started a new job, following a long period of unemployment, failed to disclose a history of depression to her new employers for fear it would impact on her chances of securing the job.

In Carlisle a young male in his 20s who suffers from depression has not disclosed his illness to employers for fear it will be taken into consideration when the funding of posts is reviewed in April 2015. Although he acknowledges that he should speak to doctors about the recent deterioration in his mental health, he is so concerned that they will sign him off that he continues to try and cope on his own. He fears the loss of work will increase the isolation he already feels.

In Wirral, the health of a female in her 50s (previously disciplined for a long sickness record) has continued to deteriorate and her mobility is now severely restricted. Up until now she has attached more importance to job security than health concerns but this recent prognosis has tipped the scales. After informing her employers of the prospect of further operations she is awaiting their response. Given previous interactions with her employers, she is pessimistic about her employment prospects.

The pressure ill-health places on household finances, and the lack of financial planning, is an issue faced by the majority of families in the study. The recent experiences of one family in the study highlights the precariousness of family finances when faced with sudden and unanticipated bouts of ill-health.

"The problem is I don't talk to people about my illness [depression] because I get scared about what people will think and say about me. I do feel isolated and I feel selfish saying that because I have got loads of people around me and I have got friends and family that care about me, I don't feel like I don't have nobody but I do get lonely and it's rubbish."

Ian (26), Carlisle

In South London the oldest daughter of a female participant was left paralysed by a life threatening condition. The lack of financial preparation and planning of the daughter and her partner exposed the financial fragility of a seemingly comfortably off young family. They had no mortgage or life protection in place to help them cover the costs of their large mortgage, or to look after their two children, in the event of any unforeseen circumstances. Income from the husband's business quickly ran out as long periods were spent at his wife's side and it was only the financial support of her mother that kept the family from going under until disability benefits came into payment. The mother had recently accepted a large severance payment from her employers and secured a more lucrative position shortly afterwards. This, and only this, unexpected source of savings enabled the mother to provide financial support to tide her daughter's family over and enable her to pay the extensive travel costs for herself and her other children to visit her daughter in hospital in Winchester.

"When you see what's happened to the NHS, I think the future's going to be harder for my children. Wirral's Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service has had its funding cut and I don't know what's going to happen to my youngest in a year's time if he needs the help, am I going to get back in to see them? Because he was suicidal before, he was getting all the help so, what do you do when you've got young ones who are feeling like that and you can't get help? I worry about them and how I'll cope, I really do worry."

Sharon (49), Wirral

Cuts to NHS services and the loss of support networks add to the strain families are already under.

- In Wirral funding cuts to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service have reduced the support available to a single parent already struggling to cope with the impact of her youngest son's disability, dyspraxia and hypermobility, on family life. The service provided vital support to the whole family; not only did staff treat her son's condition, it enabled him to socialise with children with the same condition, and it removed some of the isolation and burden from the mother by sharing her experiences with parents in the same position.
- Also in Wirral, cuts to social funding have already resulted in reduced home care visits for a disabled husband. With his wife herself suffering poor health and requiring future operations that will immobilise her, the couple expressed concern at how they will manage in the future.

The link between housing and health is well documented but the impact of isolation on health is less so. A couple in Wirral felt increasingly isolated and trapped in their home by a combination of a deterioration in the husband's mobility, a lack of public transport in the area, and the distance from local shops and facilities. After successfully applying for a property transfer, the couple have relocated to a ground flat in the centre of a small bustling town. The move has had a really positive impact on their lives.

There has been virtually no change in reported personal wellbeing with just over half of families saying they are happy in their life. The main reasons cited remain health or improved health and job prospects as well as better circumstances of family members. For those households reporting low levels of wellbeing, high levels of stress and anxiety are linked to money worries and debts, deteriorating health, and isolation. For parents in the study, concerns about children's health and finances, and the loss of family networks as children emigrate overseas counter their current situation, no matter how positive.

Case study 1: Alison's story

Alison (62), a widow lives in a three-bedroom house in Rock Ferry with two of her four adult children. A non-smoker, Alison has recently been diagnosed with emphysema. She continues to work full-time for a housing association.

Alison's job was reviewed and she was subsequently redeployed. At first she was unhappy with the changes but her new role is less physically demanding and, as her ill-health was having mobility implications, the change has been beneficial.

After two years of no pay increase after a job evaluation, Alison was awarded a 20% pay rise. The following month the company asked all staff to take a 10% pay cut or accept compulsory redundancy. Staff voted to accept the pay cut. Despite this setback, Alison's role is now secure for two years, after which she hopes to retire.

Despite her recent pay rise, Alison's salary is modest and not keeping pace with household expenditure increases. Two of her sons, Jimmy (37) and Sam (21), have recently returned home, and although both are working, their employment contracts make it difficult to predict earnings.

Sam returned home after deferring his final year at university due to ill-health, and found part-time work in a local pub. Employed on a zero-hours contract, he finds budgeting difficult as his hours and earnings vary hugely. He is unable to contribute to the household budget and is forced to rely on his mother.

Jimmy has more stable earnings but his work is commission-based and as the recession hit his earnings fell significantly. He gives Alison £75 a week, which is barely enough to cover his keep.

Household expenditure has increased significantly with Alison's sons back home; the water bill has increased from £38 to £70 (on a water meter) and the dual fuel bill has doubled from £44 to £88 per month. The food bill has also increased; "It's only a couple of pounds but when you are on a tight budget it makes a big difference."

Jimmy is planning to move out and Alison worries about how she will manage without his contribution.

As her health and mobility deteriorate, Alison's concerns about retirement mount, recently experiencing anxiety attacks. Although she saves a small amount she will be entirely reliant on a state pension.

"I'm dreading it really. I find it very scary to think that in a few years I will be reliant on benefits, pension credit, whatever because I don't have a pension, I have no pension to go to. Most of my life I brought the children up and my husband worked so I don't have a pension to fall back on. Scary to think how I will struggle when that happens."

Case study 2: Elaine's story

Elaine (54), a widow lives in a two-bedroom house in Rock Ferry. After 20 years as a care worker she was signed off on ill-health 10 years ago. She is struggling to overcome barriers to work including low literacy and numeracy, and ill-health.

Elaine receives just under £115 weekly benefits (ESA and disability benefits), but until recently was struggling to make up a £12 weekly shortfall in rent (under-occupation). In 18 months, her rent arrears have risen from £78 to £273. She has also been affected by a benefits sanction, pushing her further into debt.

Her adult son moved in with her and has had a positive impact on both her financial situation (budgeting and financial planning) and her personal situation (supporting her return to education). Although he is on job seeker's benefits (after giving up work to seek custody of his son), Elaine is no longer liable for the under-occupation charge and is making regular payments to reduce her rent arrears. Elaine is also maintaining weekly repayments of £10.29 on a £300 budgeting loan.

"I really do feel I'm struggling […] That is hard for me because I don't know where to go, who to speak to or get across what I want to get across, which I find hard. I clam up and I can't get out what I want to say. When I go home I think well why didn't I say this or why didn't I say that."

The cost of heating her home is still her largest household expense and a source of concern given her ill-health:

"At one point in February I did actually turn the heating off because it was going too quickly […] Even though it was cold, we would sometimes sit with a cover round us because I didn't really want to use too much gas, but I thought no, you can't be cold, you've got to have it on. […] I've saved a little bit of money through the summer but as the winter starts drawing in I'm going to be putting more in to keep the heating and things going […] I'm putting like £20 a week in and my son gives me an extra £10, so it's like £30 going in, more, on the gas."

Elaine has completed entry level English and Maths courses and has just started two new courses, increasing her confidence as a result. For the first time in years she can conceive a return to work and is taking her first steps with the offer of part-time voluntary work in a dogs rehoming centre.

"It would be exciting to get a new job I mean I've not been working for a long time, the only work I've ever actually known is care work so to me this is a new opportunity. It's something I want to do, something I'm hoping to do, and hopefully be successful at it as well. […] I'm not there yet but I will get there."

More information

For the full Challenging Times, Changing Lives report or more information about the study and Riverside please contact us.

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