



esro
ethnographic social research

Client

Digital Inclusion Team

Report name

Families Just Coping: Uses of technology (ICT)

Date

16/07/2009

Version

Final

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Executive Summary

For families living on a low income, life can be a constant struggle. And there is strong evidence to suggest that, when combined with other factors, such as worklessness, disability and ill-health, the effect of a low-income can be multiplied. This report serves as an introduction to the kinds of realities that make up the daily lives of families that we have chosen to call 'Just Coping'. These families often live just beyond the reach of the state, not failing but 'coping'... just. It also examines the family members' attitudes to and uses of modern technologies.

The purpose of the original research was to provide detailed pictures of family life to policy makers and practitioners to come up with potential solutions to everyday problems using new or existing technologies. Key themes that emerged during the research were:

- Deprived and forgotten places- Families just coping often lived in run-down and depressing places in which they take little pride
- Lack of money - A simple lack of financial resources caused or exacerbated nearly all other problems faced by the families. However, families often emerged as assiduous money-managers
- Lack of time - Without financial resources, the time needed to manage the basic necessities in life was increased
- Social and family networks - Families could be both help and hindrance. Parents in families just coping often felt isolated and lonely
- Social stigma - Families spent a great deal of effort trying to manage their public identities so as not to be seen as lazy or 'charity cases'
- Aspiration - Families have no lack of aspiration. Parents often express hope through the desire for children to lead better lives. But aspirations are often tempered by a pragmatic realism.

Attitudes to the use of technology were highly related to the level of access to that technology. For example, a parent without the means to buy a computer engaged less with the potential benefits of internet access. In this report we represent 4 types of attitude to modern technologies:

- Type 1: "I don't know what I'd do without it."

These people would go out of their way to make sure that access to technologies, especially the internet, were accounted for in their budgeting. They had begun to feel that the savings and benefits outweighed the costs.

- Type 2: “I get so frustrated”

These people were likely to recognise the potential benefits of various technologies such as games-consoles, computers, internet access etc., especially for their children, but were unable to utilise them.

- Type 3: “Computers are not my bag”

Respondents of this type tended to reject new technologies, feeling that they had been left out of the movement towards using technologies like mobile phones and computers in everyday life. When asked about their attitude to computers and the internet, this group were the most likely to express a strong lack of interest. The attitude often broke down during lengthy questioning, revealing an unease and embarrassment at the lack of ability to use technologies and the lack of financial means to buy them.

- Type 4: “My kids do it for me”

These people had access to various technologies but had not learned to use them themselves. Instead that used proxies (children, friends or colleagues for example) to make use of technologies on their behalf. They recognised the benefits of technologies but preferred to take advantage of them at one remove.

For families just coping, mobile phones emerged as absolutely essential tools for managing everyday life. They played a crucial role in what were often very limited social lives and could also serve as proxy technologies in order to do things like access the internet. In one case even the mobile phone became the means for children to access the internet in order to do school work. Internet access divided respondents into ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ though most now realised that the internet provided the only means to access certain services and to get at the best money-saving deals. Video games consoles were also increasingly being seen as something that children ‘must have’ in order to keep up with friends and peers. The consoles might play as important a social role in this sense for children, as the TV does for adults. The TV is a key means of feeling part of wider society as well as providing a cheap and ever-present means of entertainment. Beyond this technologies were seen as unnecessary, though desirable, luxuries. A number of barriers emerged to greater use of technology:

- Lack of money – to purchase hardware or subscriptions
- Time and effort – the lack of home access to various technologies, such as the internet, meant that a simple task like price checking would mean a long round-trip to public-access facilities.
- Stigma, fear and embarrassment – Some respondents felt that they had already been left behind and feared the stigma of being viewed as ignorant or in need of help. The lack of financial means to buy the latest hardware or to employ a teacher was also a source of embarrassment, leaving many unwilling to try and engage with the potential benefits of, for example, a computer.

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1.0 Introduction

This report considers the uses of, and attitudes towards, technology, among 'families just coping': families living in the UK and suffering from multiple disadvantages including financial poverty and worklessness. The report aims specifically to understand interactions with technology in the context of daily, lived realities. As far as possible, we aim to present the families and their lives from the perspective of the family members themselves.

Our understanding of this group has been developed largely through ethnographic and focus group research with 'just coping' families and is supported by desk research examining key statistics and policy initiatives.

The research findings presented here combine the results of two separate research projects. The first was an ethnographic study, conducted in late 2007 as part of a larger policy innovation project in Kent County Council, and involved in-depth research with 8 'just coping' families in Kent¹. Researchers spent extended periods of time with the families, observing and recording behaviour, events, feelings and attitudes as they emerged during the course of daily life. The research was aimed at producing insight into the lived realities for families 'just coping', with a mind to producing a coherent list of thematic areas that could be explored by policy makers and innovators.

The second project built on the knowledge gained during this initial phase of research, by using the identified themes to explore current uses of, and attitudes towards, technology among 'families just coping'. This research focused on one particular housing estate in Kent. By looking at one particular location and a number of families within it, it was hoped that a better understanding of the potential ways in which a locally-deployed technology or technology-based service might be used to meet families' needs. Further primary ethnographic research was conducted with 6 families by the same research team. Two focus groups were also held to explore the issues in more specific detail and to draw in the views of respondents from a wider geographical area.

The aim of this second phase of research was two-fold. First, the researchers aimed again to identify specific themes, this time around the use of technology (by both families and potentially by service providers), which might provide fertile ground for technology-based, policy and service innovations. And second, to revisit the existing findings and build a larger evidence base for the thematic areas identified during the first phase of research.

¹ A full report of the findings of this research as well as policy analysis and discussion is available from ESRO with the title "Just Coping: A new perspective on low-income families" (July, 2008)

1.1 Families just coping



This report refers to ‘families just coping’, and whilst the priority was to focus on the issues faced by the families and how this relates to their current and potential technology use, it is useful to reflect for a moment language currently used to describe and define this group.

As we will go on to see, defining the group is notoriously difficult and there are many different definitions and labels currently in use to describe families primarily identified as living on a ‘low-income’. ‘Impoverished families’, ‘families at risk’, ‘chaotic families’, ‘high harm, high cost families’, ‘families with multiple and complex problems’ are all labels that occur in the media and within policy documents, and which refer to families that we would prefer to call ‘just coping’. The central thread linking the definitions, is the notion that the families are likely to be suffering from multiple disadvantages which leave them ‘at risk’ of experiencing ‘negative outcomes’; such as long-term unemployment, interventions by social workers, poor physical and mental health etc.

The Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF) identifies seven factors which commonly characterise families who are ‘at risk’² (SETF: “Reaching out: Think Family”, 2008);

- *No parent in the family is in work;*

² SETF ‘Think Families Report’ (Jan 2008)

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/think_families/think_families_full_report.pdf

- *Family lives in poor quality or overcrowded housing*
- *No parent has any qualifications;*
- *Mother has mental health problems;*
- *At least one parent has a long-standing limiting illness, disability or infirmity;*
- *Family has a low income (below 60% of the median)*
- *Family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items*

SETF define 'at risk' families as those who experience 5 or more of these factors in combination and estimate that in 2004, around 2% (or 140,000) families fell under this definition (ibid.); – a number which, they believe, has remained fairly constant since 2001. Additionally SETF analysis indicates that the more of these disadvantages a family experiences, the more likely they are to experience negative outcomes and be (or become) socially excluded.

Looking beyond the specific use of the term 'families at risk', the most commonly used identifier of poorer families is simply an income threshold³, typically focussing on families who receive an income of 60% or less of the median British Household Income in any given year⁴. In 2006/7, it was estimated that around 1/5 of the population (13 million people) were living in households which fell below this income threshold.

The research presented here used the SETF factors as a working definition to anchor desk research and as a guide to recruitment of research respondents. However, what became clear during the primary research was that whilst the seven factors are a useful framework to help in identifying families for research, there are no *typical* 'families at risk'. Families are complex units that are affected by a large number of interconnected variables. Furthermore, specific stories are often unique and involved, a fact that can often be obscured by simple typological definition. The presence of 5 or more 'risk factors' may

3 The Poverty Site, Joseph Rowntree Foundation <http://www.poverty.org.uk/01/index.shtml>

4 According to The Poverty Site for UK statistics on poverty, in 2006/7 the 60% threshold was worth £112 per week for single adult with no dependent children and rose to £270 per week for a couple with two dependent children under 14. These sums of money are measured after income tax, council tax and housing costs have been deducted and therefore represent what the household has available to spend on everything else it needs, from food and heating to travel and entertainment.

help to identify those *most* at risk, but it is also possible that a family may be struggling to a similar degree, with just one factor present, or with only one of those factors being significant.

The focus of this report is therefore positioned somewhere in between a study of 'families at risk' and 'low income families' among those we call 'families just coping'. The term 'just coping' has two specific advantages. First, for these families, life is a constant struggle and opportunities to move out of poverty are limited, but many *are* coping, just, and may not be considered 'at immediate risk' of failure. Second, the term avoids defining people by what they do not have or are not doing or receiving, and rather reflects what they *are* doing and the way in which they *do* live. These families are often out of range of social services, precisely because they cope, and in many ways they are invisible to the state. But this should not be understood as meaning that they do not have significant needs. Perhaps ironically, parents in such families are often keen to hide the true extent of their social and financial difficulties, from peers and state bodies, in a bid to avoid the very labels like 'dysfunctional', 'chaotic' or indeed, 'at risk'.

We do recognise that within this group there are likely to be some for whom 'just coping' means being one setback away from more serious situations; families and children who perhaps might, more properly, be described as 'at risk'. However, rather than being two distinct groups, we believe that there is a precarious balance between coping and failing; and our research suggests that it would take little more than one trigger event to tip a 'just coping' family into a state of not being able to cope very well, or being pushed towards various negative outcomes.

For clarity, we begin the definition of 'just coping' families as those families with a household income at 60% (or less) of the UK median and where one or both parents are out of work. Additionally, 'families just coping' will be experiencing a number of other challenges including those listed in the SETF definition of 'families at risk' but which might also include:

- *Struggling to cope financially, even to meet basic needs such as food and clothing*
- *Main caregiver may be single or in a complex or troublesome relationship*
- *Main caregiver is under 22*
- *A Large family (e.g. more than 3 children)*
- *A parent or children who have been diagnosed with a mental / physical disability*

- *A parent who has undiagnosed mental or physical disability (e.g. low level depression or pain)*
- *Living in inadequate or overcrowded housing*
- *Having limited or complex relationships with extended family*
- *Having a limited support network*
- *Living in geographically isolated areas and/or have limited access to transport*

1.2 Broader Policy Context

In the mid to late 1990s, child poverty was higher in the UK than in nearly all other industrialised nations within the EU. The UK had the highest levels of child poverty bar Spain, Portugal and the Slovak Republic. Today, 22% of children continue to live in low income households, and 13% of children are living in persistent poverty (defined as living within a low-income household for three out of four years)⁵.

In March 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair pledged to eradicate child poverty within a generation: a pledge which was underpinned by ambitious targets. Although the Government missed their 2004/5 targets, they argue that over the past 10 years, 700,000 children have been lifted out of relative poverty⁶.

In order to reduce child poverty, a string of innovative programmes, backed by policy work, have been commissioned around the country since the nineties, in an attempt to find ways of helping and supporting 'Just coping' and 'At risk' families. One specific example of this type of activity centres on the recent 'Children's Plan', published in 2007 by the Department of Children, Schools and Families⁷.

As a result of the Children's Plan, significant energy has been devoted, at both local and central government level, to trying to close the gap between families living on the lowest incomes and those living on the highest; focussing mainly on the idea of paid work as a route out of poverty. This is also reflected in policies on the provision of tax credits, currently received by more than 6 million families, coupled more recently with the introduction of the minimum wage, and a series of New Deal initiatives. The New Deal for Lone Parents for example, which may have helped as many as 485,000 parents back into work.

⁵ See, for example, www.unicef.org.uk/press/news_detail.asp?news_id=890

⁶ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/dwp/2007/childpoverty/childpoverty-summary.pdf>

⁷ DCSF "Children's Plan" (Dec 2007) <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/childrensplan/>

Additionally, the Children's Plan outlined a number of other measures targeted at securing the wellbeing of children and families:

- Increasing free early years education and childcare, aiming to provide up to 20,000 places for 2 year olds in the most disadvantaged areas
- Doubling the number of registered childcare places, so that there is now a place for one in every four children under 8
- Allocation of £34 million to provide two expert parenting advisers in every local authority
- Expanding the number and role of school-based Parent Support Advisers
- Ensuring that more families benefit from Sure Start centres by expanding outreach programmes
- Strengthening intensive support for the neediest of families by piloting a key worker approach, bringing existing services together around identified needs

It is perhaps too early to see the real impacts that many of these initiatives have had on families just coping. However, according to one evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents in 2005⁸, 29% returned to benefits after 12 months. The evaluation research suggested many of them felt that the small amount of additional income generated through employment was not sufficient to justify the extra burden. The emotional costs and practical challenges of dealing with complex childcare arrangements and the fact of not being able to care for children themselves, were often considered too great by many parents. Our own research reiterates these material and emotional hardships that many families continue to live with, even when in work and especially when work provides only a very small financial reward.

1.3 Causes

The 'causes' of becoming a 'just coping' family or a family 'at risk' are constantly being debated and the conclusions drawn are often fiercely political. Depending upon perspective, the factors discussed could include a failure of public services (particularly schooling or health services), living in a deprived area,

⁸ "Econometric Evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents" (2006), P Dolton, JP Azevedo and J Smith, www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_356.asp
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2005-2006/rrep356.pdf>

being born into difficult home circumstances or a low socio-economic group, lack of individual aspiration, an un-stimulating family environment or lack of engagement with wider society. Often these debates are couched in the pervasive moral commentary of the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving'. In other words, the causes are often seen as being divided between those brought on by the actions of the various individuals in the families themselves or by factors beyond their control. Of course, the implications of holding one or other view, impacts directly on the politics of how the state should intervene. As such, state interventions often have an angle which is dictated by both sides of the coin; helping neutrally on the one hand through measures such as family tax credits, and offering incentive by punishment on the other, such as through fines for parents whose children do not attend school.

These kinds of politicised discourses are somewhat at odds with the more statistical and typological definitions of families outlined above. Statistical measures of income, worklessness etc. tell us little about the daily realities of the families themselves, despite the judgments being made. And it is perhaps not as obvious a finding as it seems, in terms of policy formation, when the 2008 Treasury Report *'Ending Child Poverty: Everybody's Business'*⁹ reports 'low income' as the central component of poverty.

Factors that might cause a family to be living on a low income however, are myriad. Disabled people, ethnic minorities and women (in comparison to men) are all more likely to find themselves living in low-income families than others. Factors such as level of ill-health, divorce or family estrangement, level of education, location and housing quality, employment status, debt and many others can all contribute to a person or family's level of household income. And these factors are in turn influenced by such things as the labour market, the global economy, access to healthcare, food etc. In this sense, finding simple 'causes' for a family to be living on a low-income are not easy, despite the often simplified rhetoric of behavioural causes. Nonetheless, two factors in particular have been the focus for attention in terms of policy: worklessness and parenting.

1.4 Worklessness

The treasury report goes on to note that family income is determined in large part by the employment status of the parent or parents and that therefore worklessness is a large determining factor of child poverty. In fact, children living in families where no one works, have a 58% chance of living in poverty¹⁰. Much of the momentum, in recent years, around eradicating child poverty has focused, specifically on this issue, seeing paid work as a route out. This is reflected in the long-standing policies on the provision of tax credits the New Deal initiatives. And according to the Social Exclusion Task Force's Think Family

⁹ www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/bud08_childpoverty_1310.pdf

¹⁰ http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/bud08_childpoverty_1310.pdf

report, since the introduction of the New Deal initiatives, there are now 443,000 fewer children living in workless households.

Our own research found however, that many families continue to live with emotional and material hardship, even when parents are in work; and this is reinforced by numbers suggesting that nearly half (48%) of children living in poverty actually have at least one parent who is in employment¹¹.

Additionally, as mentioned above, the evidence from the evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents in 2005 suggested that 29% returned to benefits after 12 months - citing that the small amount of additional income generated through employment was not sufficient to alleviate many of the challenges the families faced. However, since 2007, the focus has shifted from the binary of being in work or not, to job retention and progression, skills development and support in response to these remaining challenges. And the task now seems to be to find stable, sustainable employment for parents and new ways of helping them progress in the workplace.

1.5 Parenting

According to the 2008 Treasury report positive parenting-style can also reduce the likelihood that disadvantages such as growing up in a low-income household or deprived neighbourhood will have a negative impact, and a growing body of research has focused on improved parenting as a way of helping families (and children) out of poverty.



New commitments reflect a major expansion in support for parenting. For example, the Children's Plan promised two expert parenting advisers in every local authority. A £25m parenting fund was also established in 2005 to support third sector projects working in this area. Alongside these more supportive measures, initiatives have also taken a more punitive approach to tackling perceived poor

¹¹ Commissioned by the Prime Minister and conducted by David Freud: Reducing Dependency, Increasing Opportunity: options for the future of welfare to work. See summary at www.dwp.gov.uk/mediacentre/pressreleases/2007/mar/emp017-050307.asp

parenting. Fines for children missing school, parenting orders and the establishment of the Maintenance and Enforcement Commission in 2006 all underline the fact the state also still expects individuals to take responsibility for their parenting duties.

2.0 Costs to families and costs to society

Struggling on a low income is a day-to-day difficulty for just coping families. This can place a strain on family life, with serious implications for the near-term physical and mental wellbeing of parents and children as well as impacting upon the long-term life-chances of those growing up within the family. Along with this human cost comes a cost to society. An article recently published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation indicates that child poverty is costly to everyone in Britain, not just those who experience it directly¹².

2.1 Parents

Evidence suggests that being an adult living on a low income can significantly increase chances of developing a mental illness. A report by the Treasury in 2004 showed that the highest levels of depression are to be found amongst mothers of young children, those who are economically inactive and lone parents¹³. All three factors are often present within families that are just coping. Department of Health data suggests that adults in the poorest fifth of society are much more likely to be at risk of developing a mental illness than those on 'average' incomes¹⁴. Furthermore, data compiled by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) indicates that two fifths of adults aged 45 - 64 living with below-average incomes have a limiting, long-standing illness or disability. This is more than twice the rate for adults with above average incomes¹⁵.

2.2 Children

Much of the research examining the effects of growing up in a family struggling on a low income has focused on the impacts on children. Research often concludes that poverty is likely to impact upon the

12 Joseph Rowntree Foundation 'Estimating Costs of Child Poverty' (2008)

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/estimating-costs-child-poverty>

13 HM Treasury 'Child Poverty Review' (2004)

http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/childpoverty_complete_290704.pdf

14 "Health Survey for England" (2007), Department of Health

15 "General Household Survey", ONS - average for three years to 2005

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/GHS05/GHS2005.zip

long-term attainment and life chances of children who have grown up in or on the brink of poverty. For example, data shows that children who have grown up in 'at risk' families are more likely to do less well at school¹⁶. Data from the National Pupil Database shows that a significant proportion of those eligible for free schools meals fail to obtain 5 GCSEs at *any level*¹⁷ - a finding which is echoed by a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report showing that eligibility for Free School Meals is strongly associated with low achievement (though the correlation is more marked for 'white British' pupils than for other ethnic groups). The JRF report also demonstrated that other indicators of disadvantage such as the neighbourhood unemployment rate, the percentage of single parent households and the proportion of parents with low educational qualifications are also all statistically associated with low achievement at school. Some research has also suggested that growing up in a 'family at risk' can be associated with increased likelihood of contact with the police¹⁸. And those children who experience parental conflict and domestic violence are more likely to be delinquent and to commit violence or property offences¹⁹. And children aged 13 or 14 and living in families exhibiting 5 or more of the SETF risk factors are 36 times more likely to be excluded from school than similar age-group children in families in which none of the factors had been recorded²⁰.

Low educational attainment, delinquency and other facets and effects of living in low income households during childhood are, in turn, linked with an increased likelihood of negative outcomes in adulthood. For example, SETF analysis shows that the probability of experiencing "multiple problem outcomes" at age 30 rises from 5% for those who did not experience any problems in childhood to 70% for those who experienced problems at stages during childhood. For some vulnerable children, therefore, persistence of 'risk' through childhood can also lead to a high probability of poor adult outcomes.²¹

16 Social Exclusion Task Force "Families at Risk" 2007

http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/families_at%20risk/risk_data.pdf

17 National Pupil Database, DISC 2006 (Of those eligible for free school means 33% of white boys, 23% of white girls, 17% of ethnic minority boys and 15% of ethnic minority girls fail to achieve 5 GCSEs at any level)

18 Families with five or more problems are six times more likely to have been in care or to have contact with the police Millennium Cohort Study: The Millennium Cohort Study is a large-scale survey of the new century's babies and the families who are bringing them up, for the four countries of the United Kingdom, first collected during 2001/02. The National Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England follows a large cohort of young people (up to 20,000), initially contacted at age 13/14, to be followed up every year until they reach their mid 20s. The first sweep of information was collected in 2004.

19 HM Treasury, Child Poverty Review (2004)

20 Millennium Cohort Study

21 (SOURCE Feinstein, L and Sabates, R (2006), Predicting adult life outcomes from earlier signals: Identifying those at risk, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning, Institute of Education, University of London) The research examined data from surveys of families experiencing problems in the wider family environment (mental health, physical disability, substance misuse, domestic violence, financial stress, neither parent in work, teenage parenthood, poor basic skills and living in poor housing conditions) and the outcomes of the children in the household.

2.3 Costs to society



Recent research commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has attempted to calculate the total cost, in terms of public expenditure, of child poverty in the UK²². The analysis brings together existing data on how child poverty affects spending on a range of public services. It is worth drawing attention to the author's caveat that these figures are extremely difficult to calculate – relying as they do on numerous assumptions and drawing on evidence from a large number of sources. The negative effects to children of growing up in a low-income family are also likely to create further costs 'downstream' to remedy the costs of childhood deprivation, which adds a further layer of complexity to the calculation. Nonetheless, in total they estimate that the cost of child poverty to UK public expenditure is between £11.6 billion and £20.7 billion per year. Furthermore, it is suggested that whilst the Treasury can be understood as spending £2bn/year on providing benefits to adults, it is also potentially forgoing £3bn in taxes and national insurance contributions, from adults who do not get jobs as a direct result of having an impoverished upbringing.

Public expenditure that contributes to the total cost of child poverty includes:

- State benefits
- Housing (capital investment, housing benefit and council tax benefits)
- Health (ill-health associated with poverty increases demand for health services, especially GPs)
- Education (including learning support and school exclusion units)
- Area based grants and initiatives (including community and regeneration projects)
- Environmental and emergency services (costs associated with the consequences of anti-social behaviour, neglect and criminal activity)

²² Joseph Rowntree Foundation 'Estimating Costs of Child Poverty', October 2008
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/estimating-costs-child-poverty>

Even given this cost, this research concludes that often, the amount of extra spending on poor children is not sufficient to ensure impoverished families receive an adequate, fair or even standard of service.

3.0 Research with families just coping

The remainder of this report focuses on the primary qualitative research we conducted with families just coping, in Kent. Whilst the research findings here represent the attitudes and behaviours of those living specifically in that area, we believe that many of the findings will be broadly applicable to families living in other parts of the country. Many of the themes we discuss here are dealt with in greater detail in our original research and policy report entitled 'Just Coping: A New Perspective on Low-Income families' (2008) which is available free from the ESRO website or from Kent County Council.



3.1 Research methodology

The research built on existing ethnographic research carried out in Kent by ESRO, in 2007²³. The initial phase of research had involved researchers spending extended periods of time with 8 families living in different parts of the county. The findings of that research were reported in several formats and forums as part of a policy innovation programme instigated by the council. The second phase of primary research we present here built on that work and should be considered as constituting a complimentary piece rather than as a single piece which stands alone. Nonetheless, the findings presented here focus

²³ <http://www.esro.co.uk/download/justcoping.pdf>

more specifically on the families' uses of and attitudes towards technology. The purpose of this second phase of research was to present findings to a policy innovation forum as well as to be written up in the form of a report.

This second phase combined focus groups and ethnographic fieldwork with families living in Kent. The research focused on one particular large housing estate on the outskirts of Maidstone called Parkwood. All of the families recruited to take part in the fieldwork fell into the broad category of being 'just coping' but not necessarily in 'crisis'. More specifically, they were all experiencing at least four of the SETF factors, including worklessness, low level mental illness, lack of qualifications and poor quality (or overcrowded) housing.

The ethnographic fieldwork involved trained researchers spending one whole day with 6 different 'just coping' families. The techniques comprised unstructured interviews, immersion and observation in an attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of the realities of life for the families. In addition, the researchers spent a lot of time in the estate interacting with and speaking to staff at local institutions such as Sure Start, a local Healthy Living centre and a local community facility.

The focus groups enabled researchers to broaden the sample beyond families living in Parkwood, and included individuals who lived within travelling distance of Maidstone. The focus groups were structured in such a way that allowed the findings from the ethnographic research stage to be tested and verified, alongside the use of more creative techniques to understand the current (and potential) role of technology in the lives of the families. Recruitment for the focus groups followed a similar pattern to the ethnographic fieldwork, though children were not present and families were represented solely by parents.

During the course of the research we identified six themes that united the experiences of each of the families, highlighting the realities of living life on a low income. The themes were:

- ***Deprived and forgotten places***
- ***Lack of money***
- ***Lack of time***
- ***Social and family networks***
- ***Social stigma***
- ***Aspiration***

We have elaborated on each of the themes in more detail over the coming pages. However, before we elaborate on these areas further it is important to provide some general context to the lives of the families.

For the families who took part in our research, life was often characterized by struggle, unpredictability and a quest to regain control of factors that often seemed to be out of their grasp, such as spiralling debt. A way of dealing with this unpredictability and lack of control was to focus significant amounts of time and attention on managing day-to-day activities. Few were making long term plans and some described the pointlessness of planning for the longer term, when life was unpredictable and resources were so limited that they struggled simply to maintain their current position. This sense of pragmatism and of parents having a sharp focus on what could be realistically achieved was a theme that ran throughout the research.

For example, managing the weekly budget was a high priority for all of the families and activities relating to making their money 'go further' often occupied a large amount of their time. The families often knew exactly what money they had available to them in any given week or day, and knew exactly what they needed to buy. Any saving that could be achieved across any of their outgoings (no matter how small) meant that they could afford something extra that week; extra food, more electricity for the meter, a small treat (e.g. a chocolate bar) for a child. Researchers saw, for example, a mother going back and forth between market stalls and shops in order to save 10p, a father who would walk for several miles to buy food which had reached the end of its sell-by date in a distant supermarket and children earnestly explaining to peers how one type of chocolate bar could be cheaper than another.

Maintaining control at this micro-level takes significant time and energy and dominates almost every aspect of their lives. For families just coping, life is a complex juggling act, which can leave them with a sense that anything or everything could come 'crashing down' at any moment. To bring this point home, it is worth remembering that a tight weekly budget which is being used specifically to buy food for the family can be thrown into disarray by an unexpected bank charge or a call to repay overpaid tax credits.

This said, and contrary to many commonly held assumptions, all of the families involved in the research could be described as having positive aspirations for the future. Most families hoped for better housing, a nicer place to live, success for their children, work and more money. But as pragmatists, it was often difficult for the families to imagine that these things were actually possible to achieve. This did not dampen the aspiration but rather meant that immediate survival strategies took precedence. Thus hope and aspiration was often compounded by a feeling of impotence and often resulted in what the families themselves described as 'guilt' that they had fallen below their own expectations of themselves as

parents. These individuals desperately wanted to give their children more and were painfully aware of the constraints placed on their ability to do so by their life situation.

It is never easy to find a way of presenting such detailed, rich and complex data in a short report, but we have decided to take a thematic approach to understanding the life of the families, exploring six key themes that were consistently present across the fieldwork. We have then examined the issue of ICT and technology from a number of different angles, including individual attitudes and behaviours, prevalence of ownership, general perceptions towards different sorts of technology and barriers to access.

3.3 Deprived and forgotten places



Often the grim reality for families living on low incomes is that the places in which they live are not the kinds of places that inspire a sense of pride in place or home. Many of the families spoke openly about the desire to leave and words were not spared when describing the areas they lived in. Often there is anger and resentment at having to live in such places and an over-riding frustration that this is not where they want to be. Certain places can become so stigmatised in local and national media or in the conversations of those who live nearby that families who must live in them cannot help but adopt the same negative attitude. In this way families can feel like they are the target of denigration and therefore dissociate themselves by having a desire to leave and 'get out'. The places themselves, estates or run down streets with badly maintained buildings, rubbish in the streets, drab selections of shops, lacking good transport or entertainment facilities, can become symbolic of the families' life situations and many parents spoke of the desire to move away and find somewhere nicer as soon as they were able. In this sense, the families' lives and the places in which they lived became one and the same thing.

3.4 Lack of Money

One single factor unites all of the families, lack of money. Living on a low income causes or exacerbates nearly every other problem that the families face. It seems obvious to talk about lack of money in a report about families living on low-incomes, but actually the simple, crude realities of living without the means to make choices which many of us take for granted, is often forgotten. Bearing in mind the realities of having little money, one finding that will perhaps challenge assumptions is that parents often emerge as astute money managers. Parents, and indeed children, are often acutely aware of price fluctuations, and the exact amount of money in their purses, wallets and in their bank accounts. It is an unkind reality then, that 'money costs more when you're poor'. Although many parents know where the cheapest options are, the very fact that they don't have much money can exclude them from taking them up.

The daily reality of living with small budgets means that day-to-day necessities (food, travel, clothing, bills etc.) need careful management. Often, parents would remove money from bank accounts so as to be able to calculate exact amounts, down to the nearest pence, and budget for the various expenditures. Dealing in cash also prevented the risk of an unexpected direct debit or bank charge reducing a meagre weekly budget to nothing. Although this might lead to debts and long-term accrual of charges, the simple necessity of meeting the cost of basic living requirements trumped the longer-term concerns over debt. For many, debt was a fact of life and in this sense did not present as high a risk as the idea of children not being able to eat properly or wear suitable clothes to school.



In this context, unexpected bills were amongst the most frightening of possibilities. Demands for repayment of overpaid tax credits, the need for a new pair of shoes, or an unexpected phone bill could all throw best laid plans awry. Many of the parents we spoke to had little in the way of qualifications or education and found that their opportunities for work, especially given the schedules of childcare, were limited. Where people had found work, they often found that the extra demands placed on them in terms

of time and childcare costs made the job less appealing and ultimately unsustainable. Furthermore, returning to work presented, ironically, financial risk. Changes to household income imply changes to benefits entitlements, and taking a job incurred the possibility of having to stop benefits payments before wages had been paid or of incurring charges for collecting benefits for too long. Again, this might mean that a parent would have to take work knowing that it presented the prospect of a week in which buying food would be difficult. It was fairly commonplace for parents to avoid eating themselves, in order to feed children when difficult weeks occurred.

To offset many of the problems, parents had often devised quite subtle and complex strategies for minimising their daily and weekly costs. Bills were often restructured to allow for weekly payments, top-up meters were used for everything from gas bills to repayments on electrical items. Parents shopped around, learned when prices for food were dropped and juggled bill payments so as to stagger payments and not be hit by several outgoings in one week. Yet for all this, some opportunities to save money were beyond them. Low-cost loans are simply unavailable to these kinds of families, meaning that many had to borrow at higher rates or from riskier sources, direct debits (which often come with cheaper tariffs) had to be avoided in order to maintain control of the flow of money through a bank account, supermarkets with cheaper goods were often prohibitively far away etc. And of course, living close to the margins always raised the prospect of incurring penalties and charges for going overdrawn or missing a payment.

3.5 Lack of time

One common accusation laid at the feet of those who are unemployed is that they should have plenty of time to get things done. For most of the families we worked with lack of time was actually more common. With a lack of resources, everything takes longer. As we have seen the extra time needed to manage shopping budgets is one example. Using a bus when coping with children could also be expensive and difficult, especially when families lived in areas which lacked adequate public transport. This meant that many parents would choose to walk to local facilities, whether it be for shopping, collecting benefits, looking for work, going to school etc. Walking long distances also used up considerable amounts of time. All of these activities would take even longer if there was a need to deal with a child who was difficult to manage or had any kind of special needs.

Often parents would also spend significant amounts of time solving day-to-day problems, commonly centred on financial troubles or in dealing with the numerous government agencies that offered financial or practical help, as well as with the providers of various services. Single parents (who make up a large proportion of the demographic) also find that after basic needs are taken care of and children's schedules, in terms of being taken to and collected from school etc, were planned the packages of time

left are often unhelpful. A mother might find herself with 45 minutes after lunch before needing to collect children from school for example, but was unlikely to find a solid chunk of time to use usefully.

This lack of time was something which many of the families felt was not understood by those who made demands on them to fill out endless forms, attend pointless job interviews etc.: “They just think you’ve got nothing better to do.”

3.6 Social and family networks

In coping with the various struggles of daily life, extended families emerged as a source both of help and hindrance. One potential cause for a family to be living on a low-income was often family itself. Divorce can affect mothers looking after children disproportionately for example. Also estrangement from family members and isolation from one or other side of a family can mean that traditional sources of financial and emotional support are cut off.

That said, family members could also be incredibly valuable. Where ties were good we found a lot of evidence of family members providing financial and practical help to the families. Grandparents might, for example, be providing gifts in kind (nappies and presents) or taking on some childcare duties. Siblings shared living spaces in return for housework or baby-sitting etc. These kinds of informal gifts and exchanges could greatly help a family and only serve to show the potential negative effects of a rupture in family structure.

In terms of wider social networks, many of those we worked with felt incredibly isolated, with limited numbers of friends and little in the way of social life. These issues can be very complicated and require perhaps more space than we have here but suffice it to say that for some, there were inherent social risks in being seen locally. Accusations of avoiding parental responsibilities or of being out at night when unemployed, meant that many of those we met had become introverted and lacked trust in the people around them. Isolation and loneliness was common with one of the most frequently stated desires being to have close friends and more time to simply enjoy oneself.

3.7 Social stigma

The fear of being judged or as being seen as lazy or as a scrounger drove many of the thoughts and actions of those we worked with. Management of personal identity in public was a complex and worrisome affair. Contact with local social services, for example, or being seen to rely to much on

government hand-outs, was something that families assiduously avoided. There are many ways in which this could be done, from diverting attention on to other local families who seemed to receive disproportionate attention from social workers, to managing the exact times and ways in which benefits were collected and simply keeping many problems hidden from friends and neighbours.

Sources of support which could be trusted, in the sense of not sitting in judgement, were hard to come by. Often state services had very negative associations in this sense and parents found it humiliating to have to repeat life stories to various different agencies and on various different forms, let alone the possibility of having people in their home making assessments of their wealth and their ability to take care of their children.

Families, both children and parents, are acutely aware of the wider societal discourses about those who are lazy and those who are trying their best and make every attempt to associate themselves with those who work hard at making things better and avoid any association with those things which might make one appear 'lazy'. Ultimately, this might lead to the avoidance of certain services or opportunities. A course at a local Sure Start for example on how to feed children healthily, or how to be good parents, may well be useful, from both a social and practical perspective; but it may also be something to avoid as attendance might suggest that there is a weakness in one's parenting skills. Families living on low-incomes no more want to feel like they are part of a social project to help those who are unable, than anyone else.



The need to manage and strategise around the ways in which a family socialises or receives support reveal yet another of the ways in which such families are often 'just coping'. For many, contact with someone like a social worker would mark the very descent into 'not coping', and so is to be avoided at all costs.

3.8 Aspirations

Again, a common epithet to describe those living on low-incomes is that they live with low-aspirations. As we have already mentioned, we would prefer to re-couch this as 'realistic' aspirations. The families we met had no lack of hope for a better life and for most a better life involved exactly the same aspirations as anyone else might hold: a bigger house, a secure income, wealth and a stable loving relationship. Just coping however, means that such goals must often play second fiddle to the daily concerns over meeting basic needs.

Aspiration to the higher goals was often seen as being at the end of a long road ahead. Having said this, 'escape' was a commonly cited aspiration and usually referred not only to an escape from the grind of constant financial worry, but also from the geography of the places in which families lived. As one mother put it: "Nothing is ever simple or straightforward in my life. I'd like it to be different. I need to escape from this."

Often, and emphasising the long road, aspirations are mostly keenly expressed for children. There is a great deal of hope that children's lives will be better than those of the parents. Education is seen as the best way to achieve this. However, aspirations are also firmly rooted in the practical, often parents do not want to set unrealistic expectations or set goals which might repeatedly fail to materialise. Constant failure is seen as debilitating and so aspirations are often couched in what is realistic and a need to be wary of the consequences of failure: "I would like her (my daughter) to work and not have a baby straight away, although I would support her if she did get pregnant."

4.0 Attitudes toward computers and the internet



Strong evidence demonstrates the potential educational, economic and wider benefits of home access to technology. However, socio-economically disadvantaged groups have historically been over-represented amongst those that are considered 'digitally excluded'²⁴. The latest figures from OFCOM (2008) show this is still the case, with only 35% of socio-economic group 'DE' being connected to the internet in 2007²⁵. A review commissioned for UK Online Centres also found a strong correlation between social exclusion and digital exclusion, with three quarters of those who were defined as 'socially excluded' also suffering from *digital* exclusion²⁶.

Evidence also shows that a lack of access to ICT in the home can impact upon learning and achievement outcomes. For example, Schmitt and Wadsworth (2004) linked computer ownership to GCSE results, even when other socio-economic factors were accounted for²⁷. As a result, the gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from better off homes is felt to be widening. The families we studied had differing levels of access to technology and differing resources in the home. For some, the idea of having a computer in the home was a distant financial aspiration, for others it was seen as a necessary part of functioning in the world.

24 BECTA, Extending Opportunity 'Final Report of the Minister's Taskforce on Home Access to Technology' (March 2008)
http://schools.becta.org.uk/uploaddir/downloads/page_documents/partners/home_access_report.pdf

25 OFCOM 'The Consumer Experience' 2008

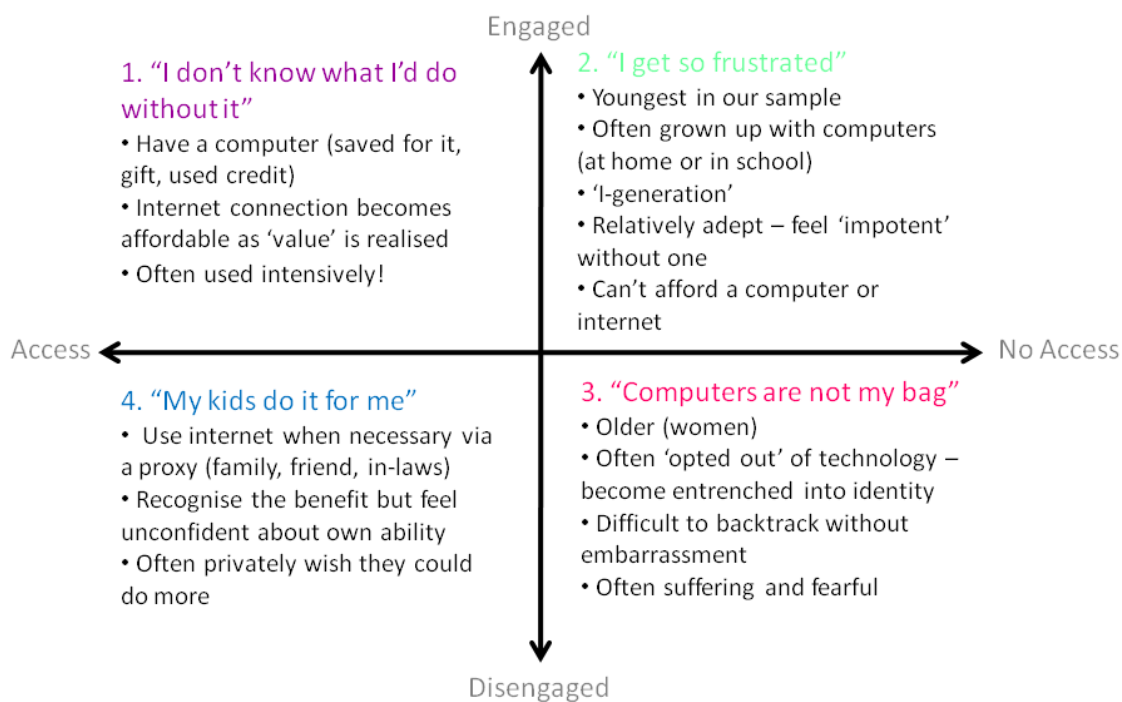
26 "Understanding Digital Inclusion" (2007) www.epractice.eu/files/documents/cases/311-1186658960.pdf

27 "Is There an Impact of Household Computer Ownership on Children's Educational Attainment in Britain?" Schmitt and Wadsworth (2004)
<http://ideas.repec.org/p/cep/cepdps/dp0625.html>

For the families, there was not a universal attitude to 'ICT'. For a start 'ICT' was not universally understood to constitute the same thing; different sorts of hardware and applications were perceived in almost entirely different ways. Often this difference was obvious: the difference between the luxury of a games console and the practical necessity of a mobile phone for example. But equally, understandings could be subtle: for one individual, the *brand* of a mobile phone was perceived to significantly affect her ability to use it.

Broadly speaking, attitudes might be clustered into different types at an attitudinal level. We have arranged these types across two axes, one representing an individual's level of 'access to' technology and the other their level of 'engagement with' technology. Our methodology was qualitative, so does not provide any indication of the relative size of these groups, rather it should be used as an indicator of the breadth of different attitudes we encountered whilst investigating this topic.

Four attitudinal typologies emerge towards use of technology (specifically computers and the internet)



The table above shows four different types of attitude towards the use of technology related also to the level of access. The construction of this kind of typology which measures both attitude and access reminds that attitudes are always intimately linked to the practical realities of access and financial means.

4.1 Typology

Type 1 – Engaged-Access: “I don’t know what I’d do without it.”

A minority of respondents that we spoke to had access to a wide range of technology including relatively sophisticated computers, mobile phones, video games consoles and even GPS ‘sat-nav’ devices. These people were likely to be highly positive about the role of technology in their life, extolling the benefits and virtues to the others in the group.

“I have super-fast broadband at home. I am always downloading things, music and films.”

Some of the most technologically enabled were young males who often prioritized their technology within their household budget, both as something they had a personal interest in and often rationally weighing up the benefits and savings to them in relation to the outgoings.

“I get all my shopping online – I save so much money. I saved £10 on nappies the other day; in fact, I think they paid me to get them! It [the technology] pays for itself when you know how to use it.”

“I chat to my brother in Australia on Skype for free. We save so much money and can talk whenever we want. It used to be the case that we would talk for a few minutes, but would be scared about how much it cost. It doesn’t matter now, we just talk away. We could talk all night if we wanted to.”

“I am always on MSN which means I can save my free minutes [on mobile phone] for when I really need them.”

When probed, those who had better access to technology were often helped out financially from significant others or loans. For example, one 22-year-old mum described receiving her laptop as a gift from her estranged father.

“I didn’t want to take it from him because we don’t talk, but I couldn’t say no to a laptop. He knew I needed one and that I wouldn’t be able to say no.”

Some of these individuals were also using technology to support more entrepreneurial activities. One was attempting to set up an internet photography business from the spare bedroom of his council flat and another was ‘renting’ out WiFi broadband access to neighbours who couldn’t afford their own connections. Sites that allow individuals to buy and sell between each other (e.g. eBay) were also commonly cited as a way to make and/or save money.

"I charge my neighbours £5 to access my home WiFi. They pay me each month, which means my access is very cheap and they get a good deal. Sometimes it's a bit of a problem because it makes it very slow, but they aren't big downloaders, so it doesn't really matter."

"I buy a lot of things on EBay. And I sell things too. It's a great way to get rid of things that you don't want anymore."

Type 2 Engaged-No Access: "I get so frustrated"

Across the research sample, many members of the families were very comfortable with technology but had little opportunity to access it. This is especially true for younger respondents, who went to schools with IT departments and often grew up (even in some of the poorest families) owning a mobile phone and having some access, via friends or family, to games consoles or computers. These respondents felt as much a part of the 'Internet Generation' as those who have grown up in more affluent families. They aspired to owning the same technologies (Ipods, Nintendo DSs and Wiis, Playstations etc) and were aware of the practical benefits and pleasure that technology can bring. The simple reality of their circumstances is that they just can't afford it.

"If I could have any gadget in the world right now, I would have a Wii Fit. I would love it! I have seen the adverts on TV and I think it looks soo cool. I could get fit in my living room whilst the kids are sleeping. It's so clever."

For these respondents, knowing how potentially useful access to the internet and other technology could be to them and yet not having access, is a source of frustration.

"I sometimes forget myself and think 'I'll just look that up on the internet' and for a split second I think I have it. And then I remember, that I don't have it."

Of all the different types, this group was often the most resourceful in trying to access the internet. They were the most likely to be using internet cafes (despite the practical challenges involved in accessing them), and were the most likely to be visiting friends or family to use their internet connection.

"My mum is like 'What you doing here again? Want to use my internet?!'"

This group was also the most determined to try and connect to the internet via other devices, with some attempting to use their mobile phones, digital TV or video games consoles.

“My kids have tried to do some of their homework on it [my phone] – they were looking for things like Oliver Cromwell I think. It took ages though, but it was quite funny them sitting around looking at the tiny screen. It wasn’t really ideal.”

“I use MSN on my phone because it’s free.”

The desire to own technology combined with the relatively prohibitive price had led some to consider taking out small loans, credit agreements or asking to borrow money from family or friends. Others had been scouring through second hand shops to see if they could pick up a bargain. The irony of the best deals to buy computers being available online was not lost on them.

Type 3 Disengaged-No Access: “Computers are not my bag”

For other respondents, particularly older women, the situation can be markedly different. For them, many aspects of technology have existed only on the periphery of their lives; used by *other* people and to do things that they have never really needed to do themselves.

Most of those in this group were using mobile phones, but they often talk about the technology begrudgingly, rather than with the enthusiasm shown by other groups. For example, they sometimes referred to the length of time they ‘held out’ before getting a mobile or described a sense of resentment that they now had one.

“I don’t want to be contacted wherever I am. I keep it switched off in my handbag.”

When asked about their attitude to computers and the internet, this group were the most likely to express a strong lack of interest.

“I thought about learning to use a computer, but what would I use it for? It would just be a waste of time.”

“I don’t really see the point in computers. I prefer to do things face to face, then you know you can trust the person. Computers are one of the problems with the world today.”

On the surface, these negative attitudes towards technology can seem quite deeply entrenched and vehemently held. However, over the course of the research it became clear that the issues were far less straightforward than the individuals originally made out. What did become clear was that learning computer skills is a complex issue, representing what is perceived to be a significant practical financial

challenge. Importantly there were also sometimes deep emotional barriers around learning and failure. The rejection of technology seemed to be a protection against the simple truths of not being able to afford to engage and of a fear that this could be yet another area which brought about the shame of failure.

“I never learnt to type. I have to look for every letter.”

“I don’t understand the language they use, it’s all words I don’t understand.”

At the end of a long conversation with one older female respondent, which mostly contained protestations of disinterest in technology, she revealed that she was fearful of opening herself up to help. She explained that this was because she was concerned that people would think she was incapable. To her, engaging in a task that might end in failure opened her up to the risk of being condemned as a *total* failure. She reasoned that it was so likely that she would fail in her attempt to learn to use the technology meant that it almost certainly wouldn’t be beneficial for her to try.

“It would take so much effort and so much time. I just can’t see who would be bothered in wanting to sit and help me. I don’t know what I would get out of it, or what they would get out of it. It would be better for both of us to do something more useful.”

Type 4 Disengaged-Access: “My kids do it for me”

A smaller number of respondents *had* recognized the benefit to them of using technology, but didn’t feel comfortable accessing it themselves. They had reconciled these two positions through asking someone close to them (often children, a neighbour or a trusted intermediary) to access the technology on their behalf.

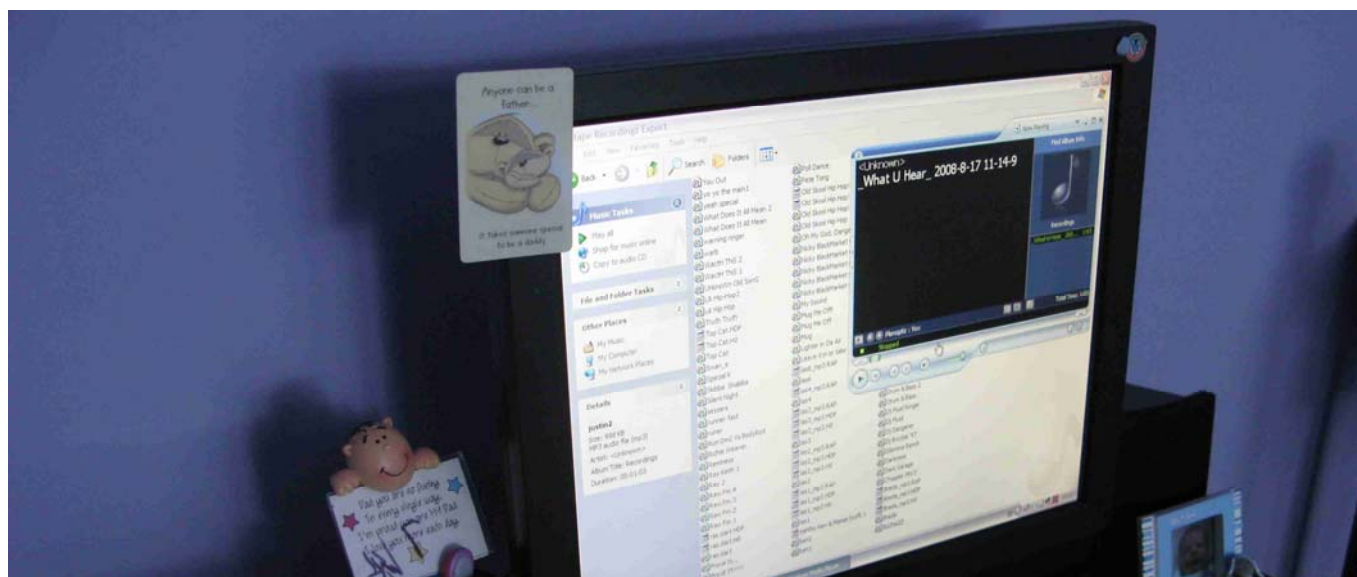
A number cited examples of others being employed to conduct a range of internet-based activities on their behalf, including sending emails, shopping online and price comparisons.

“I asked my neighbour the other day to check out fishing rods on EBay. I sat down next to him and he looked through for me. I didn’t buy one but I’ve got a better idea of what I want.”

“Karen [Sure Start worker] lets me see some photos and things on her computer at the centre. She sets it up for me and off I go, looking through.”

For these individuals, establishing this kind of relationship with a 'proxy' internet user was an important 'stepping stone' in moving from total disengagement with technology to a position where they were happy to reap some of the benefits technology had to offer, without putting themselves in a position of vulnerability or additional stress.

"My son typed out an email to the housing association about a problem we had with the boiler. I told him what to say and he typed it for me... I'm so slow that it's not worth me doing it, but he's really quick and it's done in no time. It's much better this way... He is always doing little things for me."



5.0 Technology use

The diagram below represents a simple summary of the sorts of technology that are most commonly owned and used by the families just coping. The technologies toward to centre of the diagram are the most common. The text size refers to the perceived degree of importance and benefit having access to the technology might bring.

Mobile phones are a critical piece of technology for 'just coping' families



5.1 Mobiles

The diagram above shows the dominance of the mobile phone. When asked what piece of technology was most important to their life, almost all respondents saw their mobile as essential and felt that their lives would suffer if they no longer had access to them. For many, mobile phones had totally replaced their landline phones and as a result, represented their main method of communication.

Almost all respondents (even those who considered themselves to be the least technologically 'savvy') were regularly using a large number of different functions on their phones. Those functions commonly

mentioned, ranged from the basic calls and texts, to digital cameras, instant messaging programmes, videos, Bluetooth transfer technologies, games, calculators, calendars, GPS, internet, email etc. Without a mobile phone, access to these technologies would be price prohibitive and as pragmatists, the families saw mobile phones as a useful way to have access to these resources.

“I can’t afford a digital camera and I don’t have a computer anyway. But I can take pictures on my phone and transfer it by Bluetooth for free.”

For many of the families we spoke to, their relationship and engagement with mobile phones went far beyond convenience. Staying in touch with family and friends can be incredibly difficult when travel and socialising represent a large, and often unaffordable, proportion of your weekly budget. A mobile phone with ‘unlimited’ free calls meant that maintaining quality relationships was both achievable *and* affordable.

For those we spoke to, mobile phones could also help individuals to stay in control of their lives. For example, one respondent described her mobile as an effective way to reduce the emotional strain caused by her difficult family circumstances. She regularly screened callers before answering, and felt more able to choose the times and places to conduct difficult conversations. For her, text messages also played a role in reducing familial tension:

“My mum and I will always row if we speak on the phone. For some reason it always goes pear shaped and we end up shouting at each other or one of us crying. Sometimes I text her to say sorry and then it will be okay for the next time. It’s better though if we just talk by text message sometimes.”

Beyond managing difficult relationships, we found that the ability to stay in touch is particularly important to mums, especially those with young children. These women often describe themselves as being ‘trapped in the house’, and can find getting out both a practical and emotional challenge:

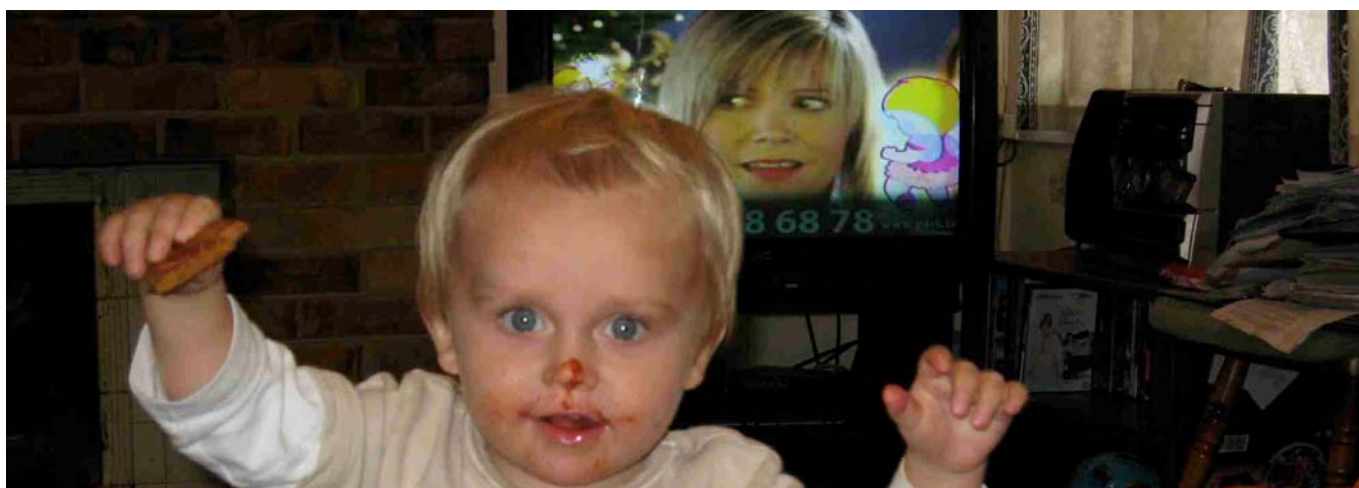
“Whenever I leave the house it involves taking the kids and the double buggy down three flights of stairs. That involves me going up and down the stairs three times, once with the buggy and then another two times with the children and the stuff I need to take. By the time I get out I am physically exhausted and I will have had to leave the children on their own whilst I do that. It sometimes means that I dread going out.”

For these families, mobile phones are felt to offer a way of engaging with the ‘outside world’ in a cost-controlled way. Most have selected the pre-pay tariffs that offer tailored combinations of free minutes,

text messages and even free internet access. This provides them with the freedom to use their phones without the fear of unpredictable bills and getting into debt.

A minority have contract-payment plans, often as a result of having worked out that paying a regular contract and receiving a higher number of free calls would represent a cost saving. However, they acknowledge that a contract is a risk and aim to avoid going over their allocation of free minutes whenever possible.

Few of the families who participated in our research had a fixed line at home. The main reason for not having a landline was cost - both in terms of an ongoing rental fee and the risk of variable, and often expensive, call charges. Across the sample, the preference was for pre-pay mobile top-ups which allow a far higher degree of control over how much money is being spent and more flexible usage.



5.2 TV and digital services

TV also plays an important role in the lives of the families with most owning multiple TV sets and having access to digital TV (Sky, Freeview, Cable etc). Television plays a number of different roles in the lives of the families:

- For many single parents, 'getting out of the house' can be a practical and emotional challenge. Television can make being at home a less solitary experience
- A lack of budget for entertainment, socializing or childcare means that TV becomes a relatively affordable, in-home entertainment

- Children's TV can give mums respite from childcare and a chance to complete household chores
- TV is also described as a way of escape - providing fuel for dreams and aspirations (e.g. films, quiz shows) and a reminder of the gritty 'normality' of their lives (e.g. Jeremy Kyle, Eastenders)

In the final analysis, television plays an important social function in allowing families to engage with world around them, gain information and as a form of easily accessible cheap entertainment. As such, the television is one of the most important means by which families can feel that they have a semblance of a normal life.

5.3 Computers and the internet

Across the sample, a minority of families had access to computers (either desktops or laptops) which are connected to broadband internet. A small number had computers but no internet access. Most of those we spoke to described their computers as old and slow, meaning that they were often running very basic programs and had little space available in the machine to do anything more sophisticated. A very small number had newer computers that were more up to date and capable of running more sophisticated software.

For those with no access to a home computer, owning the technology is highly aspirational and is often tied to the desire for children to be able to do things which parents could not.

"I would love a computer. My kids would be over the moon. They would be able to do their homework on it, like the other kids at school."

"I don't want them to be the ones that don't know how to use computers. So we will have to get one at some stage."

Almost all in our sample thought that having some form of access to a computer was becoming more and more essential.

"You can't do loads of things if you don't have a computer. Like, a lot of job applications you need to send an email and all of the council house exchanges are online now. If you don't have a computer then you lose out."

However, for many of the families just coping with financial hardship the initial cost of getting a computer and the ongoing cost of broadband and telephone line rental was considered to be too expensive.

In the table below we have outlined the main ways respondents (both current users and non-users) believed the internet was or could be, of use to them. Surprisingly, even those who had the least experience with computers and the internet were often conversant in the strengths and weaknesses of using the internet to achieve certain goals. However, the least technologically enabled respondents were often more forthcoming with disadvantages and problems of using the internet before recognising the benefits (e.g. online fraud, protection of personal data, unverifiable information etc.).

| | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|--|---|---|
| Staying in touch | Cheap (often free) ways of communicating via email and instant messenger - especially important for long distance / international calls. | Some question the quality of 'text-based' conversations (e.g. MSN), limited awareness of VOIP applications such as Skype. |
| Engaging with service providers | Many appreciate the benefits of being able to email or communicate with service providers, rather than having to wait in phone queues or write letters. Felt to be more convenient and likely to enable a faster response time. | Some liked the physical certainty of receiving a letter and wonder if an email would constitute a formal dialogue - resulting in a need to duplicate communication by letter? |
| Online Banking / financial transactions | Most are aware of the ability to pay bills and manage finances online. For many, this aspect of 'financial control' is extremely desirable - and something they currently prioritise. | Some are sceptical about the security of making financial transactions online and are fearful about the risk of losing through fraud money that they can't afford to lose |
| Shopping | The benefits of online shopping are widely recognised by many 'just coping' families. A particular benefit is thought to be home delivery, which addresses the significant problems associated with carrying heavy shopping, long distances (often with children and lack of access to easy or affordable transportation) | Shopping for good deals and obtaining the best value is a significant part of many individuals' day-to-day routines. Whilst online shopping is often felt to be a way of obtaining good value - many feel that the drawback of not being able to properly judge value by handling the physical goods may outweigh any 'virtual' savings |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| | | |
| Price Comparison | For 'just coping' families, information about price is often reliant on advertising. Access to price comparison websites is recognised as a highly effective way to save money and empower them to choose better deals - especially when signing a contract (e.g. mobile phone or satellite TV) | Majority felt there were no disadvantages with price comparison websites, save for their own lack of access to them. A minority of the most tech-savvy had concerns about how the websites were funded and how information was presented resulting in some cynicism (i.e. what is a genuine comparison v. an advert / short term deal etc) |
| Entertainment | Some respondents felt that the access to the internet would enable them to cheaper access to music, films and games. | Some concerns around what is illegal vs. legal music downloading. |
| General information | For many of our respondents, simply being able to use the internet on an ad-hoc basis to access general information would be extremely beneficial. Examples cited include finding out addresses, contact numbers, maps, leaflets, pamphlets, health advice etc. | Some state a preference for asking a 'verifiable expert', rather than relying on an anonymous author. <i>'don't know who has put all that information up there, could be anyone'</i> |
| Learning and training | Some respondents express a significant amount of interest in being able to participate in training courses or education from home. Generally felt to be far more convenient and more likely that they would be able to fit it in their daily schedule. | Some, especially least familiar with computers, express difficulty with reading documents on a VDU and feel that engaging with a course via 'impersonal' and 'unsupportive' computer terminal may not provide them with an environment conducive to learning. |

5.4 Games consoles and other luxuries

A number of the families had access to some form of games console. These were mainly used by the children in the household and parents had little access to them or understanding of their capabilities.

"Last Christmas, Courtney asked everyone for money to go towards a Nintendo DX. She had saved some of her birthday money too and we went and bought it for her. She got two games with it, but buying the games costs a fortune... I don't know anything about it, other than it plays games"

With increasing numbers of these machines now providing internet access and the increasing prevalence of children having them, video games consoles may offer a route in the future for providing parents with access to the various opportunities offered by the internet without having to buy a computer.

Few individuals in our sample owned or had access to a digital camera or MP3 player (beyond what their mobile phones could offer). Such devices were felt to be highly aspirational and are clearly objects of desire but are considered of little practical use without regular access to a computer.

Technology which did not have a practical benefit or that was not of immediate interest to children was largely seen as being an unnecessary expense. There is a sense in which many of the families we researched were falling behind in terms of knowledge of how to use many of the latest technologies.

6.0 Barriers

The main barrier to accessing home ICT for families just coping was money, both to buy the hardware and the ongoing costs of broadband subscriptions, line rental costs etc. However, there were also barriers to accessing publicly provided ICT resources.

6.1 Money

For those who don't have access to certain forms of ICT, the most commonly cited barrier is cost. For these families buying even the cheapest model of computer represents a significant out-going and whilst many can see that there will be a return on investment, the effect on family finances is often felt to be a risk not worth taking.

Many respondents talk with a high degree of detail about costs relating to initial outlay for equipment and the need to enter into long-term financial contracts (for telephone lines and broadband). There is also a great awareness that equipment can quickly become outdated and that buying a cheap machine may not be a sound long-term investment. The complexity of choosing an affordable machine that will represent good value, both in the short and long term, is considered an issue for even the most 'techno-savvy' of respondents. However, for the majority of those in our sample, the discussion is elementary. Put simply, the cost of a computer is out of their budgetary means and therefore out of reach.

For those who do own computers or have internet connections, the decision to go ahead was not taken lightly. It often meant the sacrifice of something else on the household budget. And for some, obtaining a computer would not have been possible without significant help from family and friends.

"I was given my computer as a present from my dad. I would never have been able to afford one otherwise."

"A friend of a friend works in something to do with IT in London. They sometimes have old computers that people are throwing away because they don't have the right spec or something. I managed to get one about 3 years ago, it was a bit slow but it all worked and it still works now. It's really slow, it takes ages for anything to load and it crashes all the time. But we can't afford to get a new one."

This said, many without access to technology cite recent attempts to purchase or gain better access to computer equipment. It is widely felt that not having access to the internet in particular is an impediment to effectively getting on with life, and there are numerous examples of costs associated with not being connected (e.g. not being able to apply for jobs, missing out on online council-house transfers, not being able to buy and sell goods etc). In fact, some have considered trying to get a loan or credit to try and buy one.

"I don't think you can get a loan from the social for a computer. They only give you them for beds or redecorating or things like that. I have thought about telling them I need a new bed and seeing if I could get £200 for a computer."

Families also recognise the importance that children develop competence and skills using computers and the internet and feel a sense of failure in their own inability to be able to provide them with home access. However, for many of the families, the need for a computer pales into insignificance compared to the constant pressure to have enough food on the table and clothes to wear.

"To be honest, you say that I could save up for a computer; a few pounds a week or something like that. But if I had a few pounds more a week I would buy more food; we struggle to eat properly on what we have. Saving for a computer is not the most important thing to me and my family right now"

"Do you know how much school shoes cost? I have three kids and just providing them with shoes takes almost all of my household budget. I just can't justify any more expense."

6.2 Time and effort

Almost all respondents we spoke to had a high level of awareness of public internet access facilities, regularly citing local libraries and internet cafés. However, for these families using these access points can represent a significant challenge in terms of time and effort.

"Using the Internet at the Healthy Living Centre is quite hard for me. It's only open at lunchtimes which means that I end up missing my toddler groups and parenting classes that are in the mornings. I also have to take Kayleigh and Sam [children aged 8 and 18 months] with me. If the computers aren't free when I get there we have to sit around for ages and they get really bored and kick up a fuss. There isn't really the space for me to look after them and sit at a computer, which makes using the Internet really difficult. Plus the internet there is really slow which makes everything take ages... It just isn't really practical to use the Internet there if you have young kids."

Furthermore, using the Internet in a public place often necessitates a period of intense internet use which is not felt to reflect the ad hoc way most people make use of the web.

"When you have the internet you use it all the time, you think to yourself 'I'll just check this, or look up that'. You don't plan to use the Internet for an hour this evening and have a list of jobs to do. That's why going to the Internet Café doesn't really work for me; it doesn't fit the way I want to use the internet."

"I have often thought to myself that there are a few things I could sell on eBay to make a bit of money, but it is practically impossible to do it if you don't have a computer at home. You want to be able to upload it all and make changes and watch the bids - I can't really see it happening if you had to go to the internet café every day."

6.3 Stigma, fear and embarrassment

One of the main challenges facing families just coping, is the fear of being stigmatised, and in particular being thought of as incapable or failing. Individuals often build up strong defence mechanisms to avoid being thought of in these terms. For some of our families this kind of attitude prevented some access to computer training and public ICT facilities that were provided in the context of a 'supportive services' environment.

"I don't want other people to think that I can't manage. I can manage"

"I am not a charity case"

"I don't need other peoples help, I am doing just fine on my own"

For these families, formal and informal helping services and interventions can be interpreted as potential sources of stigma or judgement. Admitting the need for help can be interpreted as publicly admitting failure. Some are so concerned about maintaining the image of 'just coping' and avoiding 'just failing' that they refuse to access services which they recognise would be beneficial to them.

"People would say 'didn't you see so and so went to get help for this and that' and they would be thinking that I couldn't do it without getting help. Sometimes it just better to pretend that you don't need it."

“The Healthy Living Centre, it has cheap food and computers but nobody really goes there to eat, because it’s like saying ‘I can’t afford to feed my kids today’. Some people don’t care about that, but I do”

7.0 Case Studies

This section of the report provides a selection of case studies illustrating how a range of organisations, both national and local, are using technologies creatively to help individuals and families address issues such as a lack of time or money, living in a deprived area, having limited social networks, fearing social stigma associated with accessing services or experiencing barriers to accessing and using ICTs. The selection below is by no means exhaustive but is intended to provide a flavour of the wide range of projects and activities taking place to support 'Just Coping' families.

7.1 Turn2Us²⁸

Turn2us is a charity that exists to help people living in financial need in the UK to access the money available to them - through welfare benefits, grants and other financial help. The free website www.turn2us.org.uk has been designed to help people find appropriate sources of financial support, quickly and easily, based on their particular needs and circumstances. It is also designed to be used by intermediaries such as advisers, support workers, volunteer home visitors or welfare officers who have regular face-to-face contact with people in financial need

Features include:

- A Benefits Checker that helps people ensure that they are receiving all the welfare benefits they are entitled to
- A Grants Search section containing the details of hundreds of grant-giving charities (national, regional and local) that may be able to provide financial support and other services
- A confidential 'My Turn2us' account that can be used to make online enquiries and applications to grant-giving charities
- Information and interactive tools covering a wide range of subjects on welfare benefits, grants and managing money.

Turn2Us also offers a free and confidential helpline (0808 802 2000) for those who do not have access to the internet.

²⁸ <http://www.turn2us.org.uk/default.aspx>

7.3 StartHere²⁹

StartHere is a national charity that works with public and voluntary sector organisations to improve access to information and services, particularly for socially disadvantaged and digitally excluded groups who may have difficulty accessing mainstream online services. StartHere provides a technology-based information service that acts as a single starting point from where people can access the information and services they need in times of crisis or distress.

It provides information on a wide range of health, care-related and other social issues, and quickly directs users to the most relevant organisations and services that can help, whether statutory or voluntary, both nationally and in their local area. The service is delivered through partner organisations, including GP surgeries, community centres, prisons and probation centres, and runs on a number of platforms including the internet, digital TV, touch-screen internet kiosks, stand-alone PCs and mobile phones.



²⁹ <http://www.starthere.org/>

7.4 NetMums³⁰

Set up in 2000, Netmums is an online parenting organisation which now has over half a million members. Netmums offers a network of local sites that cover the UK; once you have registered on your local site you can access information on the local resources available to you, from child-friendly cafes to childminders and places to go.

The Netmums website includes a range of features which enable parents to share information, support one another and combat social isolation, including the online Coffee House discussion forum, and the 'Meet-a-mum' section which helps parents to make contact with other parents in their local area and then arrange to meet in person.

It is of note that Netmums has been able to reach families considered by government to be "hard to reach". While D/E internet users usually account for 20% of the online population, they accounted for 32.4% of traffic to Netmums (this figure is based on data collected during a 4 week period in August 2008). This seems to be due in part to the local relevance of the information Netmums offers, and in part to the word-of-mouth effect of the website.

Netmums say they identify strongly with the term "Just Coping" as this is something encountered regularly from the mums accessing their forums for information and support. In many cases these women have somehow slipped through the net of traditional support such as health visitors, mental health teams or Sure Start centres. The aim of Netmums is to re-engage these mums with their service providers, and to do what they can to keep these mothers "Just Coping" until such time as they can access local, practical help.

In recognition of this work, in 2008 Netmums were awarded a grant by the Parent Know How fund of the DfES to employ professional, online parent supporters. This funding has recently been extended until 2011.

³⁰ <http://www.netmums.com/home/home/>

7.2 Letsgo Card³¹

The Letsgo card project was run by Sunderland City Council in partnership with the Department for Children, Schools and Families as part of a national Empowering Young People Pilot.³² The project was live from 1st April 2008 to 31st May 2009. The purpose of the pilot was to investigate how providing disadvantaged young people with the spending power to take part in their own choice of positive activities could contribute to their educational engagement and achieve other positive outcomes.

Young people in school years 9 to 12 who were eligible for free school meals (FSM), free college meals (FCM) or were looked after (LAC) were eligible for a Letsgo card. The criteria was set by DCSF with economic deprivation being the main driver. Letsgo card holders received £33 a month spending power that could be used to access positive activities of their choice from the date they registered to 1st March 2009. They used their Letsgo card, PIN and card reader to access the Letsgo card portal to view available funds, activities and events, status of tickets and history of activities that they have paid for. They chose an event and purchased a ticket, downloaded the electronic ticket to their card and took it along to the activity provider. The activity provider checked that there was a valid ticket on their card and allowed them access to the activity.

The project benefited young people in a number of ways:

- Access to activities: Young people were able to attend school trips that they would otherwise have missed out on as arrangements were made for them to pay using their Letsgo card.
- Financial budgeting: Young people were required to budget their Letsgo card spending power to ensure they had enough credit each month to take part in everything they wished to do. Feedback received from a parent was: *"The Letsgo card takes the pressure off me financially, but more importantly it gives the young people a responsibility and they gain an understanding of how to manage money"*.
- Being healthy: A large number of the activities available were physically active. Taking part in these activities increased young people's emotional health and doing things after school and in the holidays reduced risk-taking behaviour in the target group.

Comments from the young people themselves on the positive impact of the Letsgo card project included: "I've been able to go places and me and my brother have spent more time together"; "The Letsgo card helped my family to trust me to go out", and "It made me work harder at school because I had the weekend to look forward to, and talking to friends about Letsgo card and things to do."

³¹ http://www.letsgosunderland.com/viewArticleTOC.asp?search_id=64557

³² <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/RRP/u015584/index.shtml>

Some key facts about the Letsgo card project are:

- 2,533 young people registered for their Letsgo card
- 100 different organisations offered activities for Letsgo card holders
- 91 different activity providers had tickets purchased for the events they advertised on the portal
- 2001 young people (79% of all card holders) accessed some of their Letsgo card spending power
- All of the Letsgo card holders in residential children's homes used their Letsgo card
- 32,633 tickets were purchased during the pilot
- 1,700 young people who purchased tickets attended 20,000 events
- Empire Theatre and Sunderland AFC match tickets always sold out as they were new experiences for a lot of young people
- 1,350 young people took a friend or family member to an event, therefore overall at least 3,050 people benefited from Letsgo card
- Overall £407,141 subsidy was used to pay for positive activities

Young people were always at the centre of the project so that they were empowered by having choice, opportunities and a voice. Approximately 900 young people were involved in the design and evaluation of Letsgo card.

7.5 ConnectMK³³

Connect>MK was formed in response to demands by residents and businesses of Milton Keynes to help improve access to broadband services. It is a private limited company wholly owned by Milton Keynes Council.

With the support of Milton Keynes council and Microsoft, Connect>MK have created a low-cost PC and laptop loan scheme to provide home access to these technologies for those who would otherwise find it difficult to afford. Those who qualify for the scheme (people who receive benefits or have a household income below £25,000) can hire a computer and support for £1.50 per week. Over 900 Milton Keynes residents are currently participating in this computer loan scheme. Lena Wilshire, a 36 year old Romanian Gypsy who lives at the Romany site at Calverton in Milton Keynes, has used the computer she hired to improve her literacy. She said "It's enabled me to go to college, email friends and make new friends. It is helping me with my education. I use the internet to look at preaching sites and more recently I have become interested in poetry. Both things encourage me and inspire me."

³³ <http://www.connectmk.com/>

Fadumo Odegleh is another Milton Keynes resident who has benefited from this scheme. Fadumo, who is retired and is her teenage grandson's guardian, has been using the computer loaned by Connect>MK to support her voluntary work in her local community. Her grandson is also using the computer to help with his school work.



Other initiatives Connect>MK is responsible for include a low cost Wimax broadband service for the city which currently has over 200 customers, Digital Service Centres which offer ICT training and free Internet access in community facilities, and an innovative avatar information service on the council website. In December 2008 the European Commission awarded Connect>MK an e-Inclusion Award³⁴ for their work.

7.6 Everybody Online³⁵

Everybody Online is a programme designed to help communities and individuals in disadvantaged areas to engage with digital technology. This programme, run by the national charity Citizens Online, consists of a network of Everybody Online projects which are based in disadvantaged communities across the UK.

³⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/events/e-inclusion/2008/exhibition/awards/index_en.htm

³⁵ Visit http://www.citizensonline.org.uk/everybody_online to find out more

Each Everybody Online project has its own champion who works closely with the community to overcome any barriers they may have to accessing computers, the Internet and other technologies. Everybody Online project champions work in partnership with local organisations and volunteers to set up community-based public internet access points and provide people with new learning opportunities in their local area. Everybody Online projects provide a variety of free, informal sessions to support people of all ages and abilities to use new technologies. Sessions on offer may include internet ‘taster sessions’, employment related support, ‘Silver Surfers’, ‘Wii and Tea’ social activities, digital design and filming projects.

Since 2003, 22 projects have been in operation across the UK, with 6 of these currently in operation (including projects in London, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Andover, Caithness and Bristol) and former projects being absorbed into their local communities.



7.7 InsightShare³⁶

Insight Share, a UK-based organisation which operates in partnership with organisations and communities across the world, has developed Participatory Video as a tool for empowering individuals and communities. Participatory Video methods value local knowledge, build bridges between communities and decision-makers and enable people to develop greater control over their own community and the decisions affecting their lives.

³⁶ <http://www.insightshare.org/>

In Participatory Video projects, community development activities are enhanced by handing over control of the project to the target community. Participants rapidly learn how to use video equipment through games and exercises. Facilitators then help groups to identify and analyse important issues in their community, and short videos are directed and filmed by the participants. Throughout the filming process, footage is shared with the wider community at daily screenings and a dynamic process of community-led learning, sharing and exchange is set in motion. Completed films become powerful advocacy tools which can be used both to stimulate horizontal communication within the community and to facilitate vertical communication with decision-makers.



7.8 Time Banking³⁷

A time bank is a new and exciting way for people to come together to help others and help themselves at the same time. Participants 'deposit' their time in the bank by giving practical help and support to others and are able to 'withdraw' their time when they need something done themselves.

Time banks measure and value all the different kinds of help and skills we can offer each other. In a time bank, *everyone* becomes both a giver and a receiver. Everyone's time is valued equally; one hour generates one time credit. Participants can spend their time credits on the skills and support of other

³⁷ <http://www.timebanking.org/index.htm>

participants when they need a helping hand. People help each other out with everything from making phone calls to sharing meals, giving lifts to the shops, teaching digital photography or helping someone to write their CV - anything that brings them together.

A time bank can help to:

- Bring people together in a spirit of equality
- Value and record contributions to community life
- Build an individual's confidence and skills
- Build organisational capacity
- Build community networks and knowledge
- Get things done that wouldn't get done otherwise (by funding in time credits)
- Encourage community participation

All transactions in a Time Bank are arranged through a central Time Broker who carries out security checks on new members and uses Time Online computer software to arrange matches between participants, keep track of which services are being carried out at any given time and keep a log of the time credits that participants have earned or spent.

Time banking has witnessed spectacular growth in the UK since it first started in 1998. The organisation Timebanking UK was set up in 2000 by time banking pioneers Fair Shares and the New Economics Foundation to help individuals, organisations and communities to set up and run their own time banks and provide support for all aspects of time banking.

The latest statistics for time banks in the UK are:

- 108 active time banks
- 101 developing time banks
- 3 neighbourhood time banks
- 11186 participants actively involved in time banking
- 967852 hours traded between participants to date

8.0 Conclusion

This report provided an introduction to the realities of life for ‘families just coping’ and includes an analysis of the family members’ attitudes to and uses of modern technologies.

Labels are always complex and the term ‘families just coping’ refers to a group positioned between ‘low income families’ and families at risk. These families are likely to be suffering from multiple disadvantages which leave them at risk of experiencing negative outcomes. However, they are coping – but only just. Across the research we identified six themes that united the experiences of each of the families, highlighting the realities of living life on a low income. These themes were:

- *Deprived and forgotten places*
- *Lack of money*
- *Lack of time*
- *Social and family networks*
- *Social stigma*
- *Aspiration*

For the families who took part in our research, life was often characterized by struggle, unpredictability and a quest to stay in control of their lives. A way of dealing with this unpredictability was to focus significant amounts of time and attention on managing day-to-day activities. For example, managing household finances was a high priority for all of the families and activities relating to this often occupied a large amount of their time.

This said, and contrary to many commonly held assumptions, all of the families involved in the research could be described as having positive aspirations for the future. These individuals desperately wanted to give their children more and were painfully aware of the constraints placed on their ability to do so by their life situation.

Attitudes and access to technologies

Across the research mobile phones emerged as being highly important to the families throughout all aspects of day to day life. Almost all respondents (even those who considered themselves to be the least technologically ‘savvy’) were regularly using a large number of different functions on their phones, ranging from the basic calls and texts, to digital cameras, instant messaging programmes, videos, Bluetooth transfer technologies, games, calculators, calendars, GPS, internet and email.

Attitudes towards computers and the internet demonstrated a greater level of variation. Broadly speaking, attitudes might be clustered into different 'attitudinal typologies'; in this report we represented 4 types of attitude to modern technologies.

- People who fell into the category of Type 1 "I don't know what I'd do without it", felt that the savings and benefits of access to technologies outweighed the costs and would go out of their way to make sure they could budget for them.
- Those in Type 2, "I get so frustrated", were likely to recognize the benefits of computers and the internet, especially for their children, but were unable to access them.
- Respondents of Type 3 "Computers are not my bag" felt that they had been left out of the movement towards using technologies like mobile phones and computers in everyday life and were the group most likely to express a strong lack of interest in using these technologies. After lengthy questioning they often revealed a relative unease and embarrassment at their lack of ability to use technologies and the lack of financial means to buy them.
- Those in Type 4, "My kids do it for me," recognised the benefits of technologies but didn't feel comfortable using them and often resorted to asking a friend or family member to use the computer on their behalf.

Barriers to using technologies

The main barrier to accessing home ICT for families just coping was money, both to buy the hardware and the ongoing costs of broadband subscriptions and line rental costs. When probed, those who had better access to technology had often been helped out financially from significant others or loans. For those with no access to a home computer, a computer was often highly aspiration – but the route to getting was difficult and laden with barriers. Across the research, it was widely felt that not having access to the internet in particular is an impediment to effectively getting on with life, and most now realised that the internet provided the only means to access certain services and to get at the best money-saving deals. For parents, computers were often intrinsically linked with the desire for children to be able to do things which parents could not.

For those who had no home access to these technologies, the time and effort involved in using public access points was also presented as a significant challenge. Using the Internet in a public place could present difficulties for parents when caring for children. Public internet provision was also not felt to reflect the ad hoc way most people make use of the web.

For those who were less confident with using these technologies, learning computer skills was also a complex issue which could tap into deep emotional barriers around learning and failure. Some families also mentioned fear of being stigmatised for accessing computer training and public ICT facilities that were provided in the context of a 'supportive services' environment.



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