



England  
South East



University of  
Reading



**Is the current cost of living making a difference to the health and happiness of Portsmouth families?**

A Community Participatory Action Research project conducted by Alison Bond

- **Introduction - background to the research:**

I was employed by Home-Start Portsmouth, supported by Portsmouth City Council to carry out a Community Participatory Action Research Project (CPAR). I have been a member of the Portsmouth Parent Board since 2019 and a Home-Start volunteer, mainly helping run stay & play sessions for parents/carers with children 0-5, since 2021. I am also a qualified youth worker and graduated from the University of Portsmouth with a Sociology degree (BSc Hons 2:1).

- **The research proposal:**

The remit was to formulate a research question that explored the impact of the cost of living on health. From my existing community connections, the conversations I'd already had with parents and secondary data I looked at, I decided to focus on the health and happiness of Portsmouth families. In this instance 'family' is being defined as a unit made up of 1 or more parents living with 1 or more children aged 18 and under.

I wanted to consider happiness as it is something I have not seen researched/talked about when looking at the quality of a person's life or a community as a whole, compared to studies regarding health and wellbeing.

- **Research process and methods:**

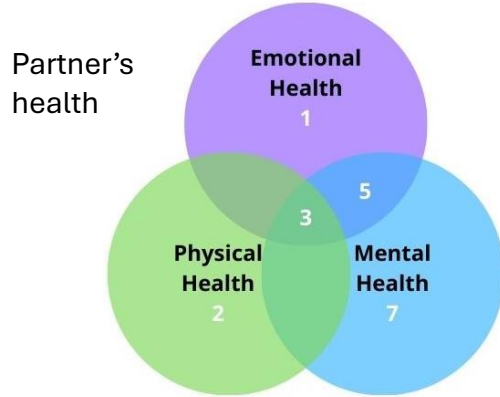
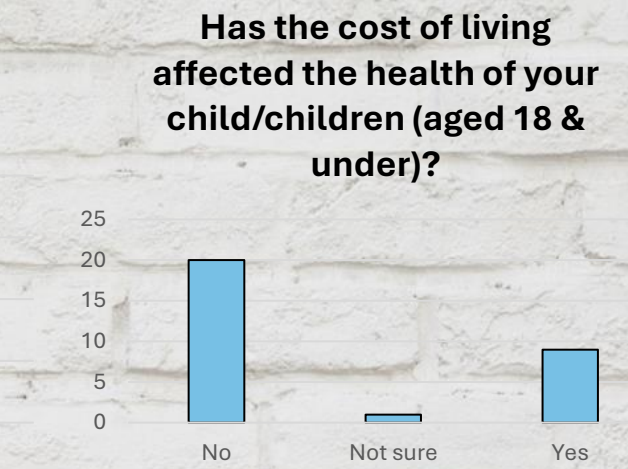
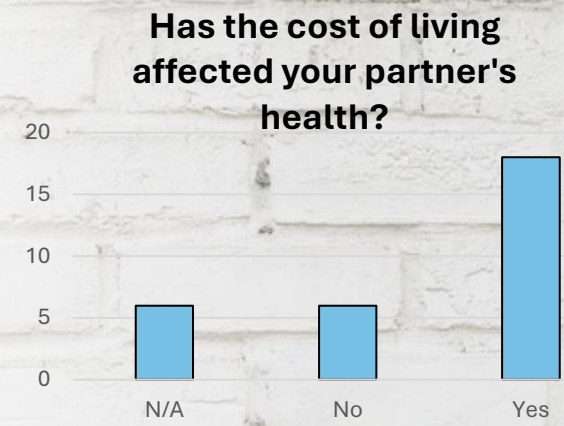
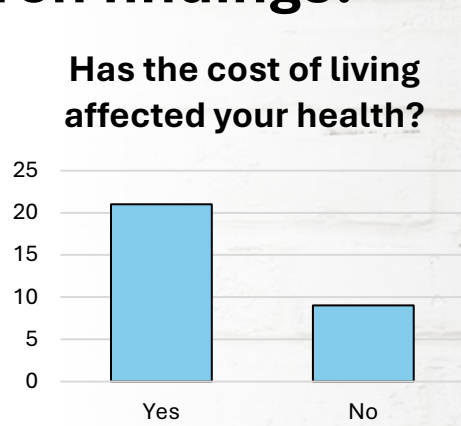
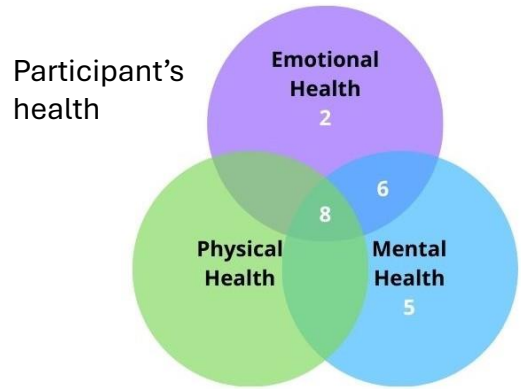
I chose to use both quantitative and qualitative methods, because I believe statistics can relay a situation, but more open ended, in-depth questions can tell a story. The point of CPAR is to hear more from those who may not be involved in typical research and get a sense of their lived experience.

I devised a survey that used both closed and open questions. This gave me both quantitative data to determine whether I had chosen a relevant question and qualitative data that enabled further exploration. 30 participants took part, the majority of whom were from Stay & Play groups where I was on hand to answer any queries and chat further. I then developed a focus group plan and questions and carried out 2 interviews (survey participants who had shown interest in taking part 1:1).

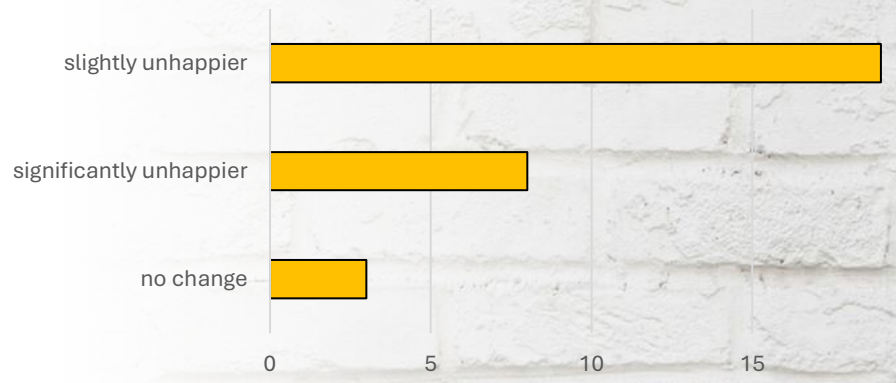
Trying to arrange a time and place for a face-to-face focus group proved difficult so I adapted my plan and used my questions during a stay & play session, with parents writing answers on post-it notes and sticking them on the relevant question. This resulted in some very pertinent responses but meant I didn't get as much of an opportunity to go into more depth with those who took part.

I analysed my surveys using Excel and looked for common themes running through the open-ended questions, focus group findings and transcriptions of the interviews.

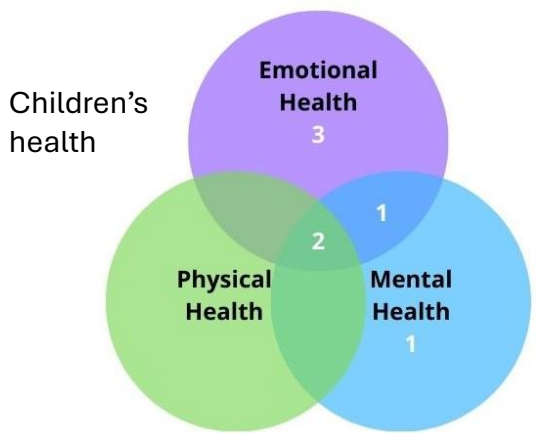
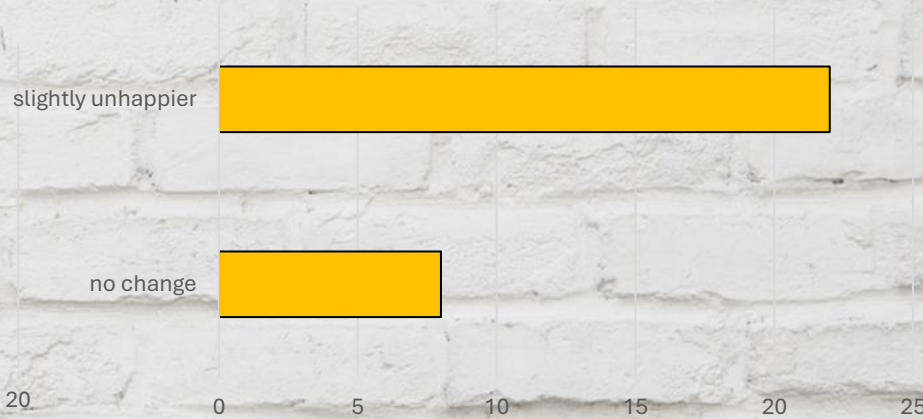
• **Quantitative research findings:**



**Since the increase in the cost of living over the past couple of years, have you felt:**  
(please choose ONE of the following options)



**Does your family unit seem... (please choose ONE of the following options)**



- **Qualitative research findings – adapted focus group plan:**

## How has the cost of living affected you and your family's health?

Worrying about money all the time has had a negative impact on my mental and emotional health.

My mental health. It's a drain knowing you have to budget and make things last, worrying if you will have enough until the end of the month.

No NHS dentist meant going private - we spent more money on my recent dental treatment than we did on our wedding.

The cost of living has affected my family's health, because we are living in a small, over crowded flat. As a large family (2 adults, 3 children) we are struggling with day-to-day life in inadequate housing, but moving to a more appropriate home is not an option, because of inflated rents and housing costs.

Anxiety about the cost of living affects my sleep and then it's harder to function the next day.

## How has the cost of living affected you and your family's happiness?

Money is always a worry - we're on one wage and even though it is well paid we still have to be thoughtful of spending in all aspects of our lives.

Less socialising/activities for kids. Free playgroups like the Home-Start ones are a godsend.

This is quite a stressful time financially, trying to support your family and remain happy for your children and not allow them to see the stress.

There is a stress on finances which can affect us a bit mental health wise, but we don't show that to the children. We still are generally happy and try to do as much as we can.

Constant worrying and stress for the "extras" that didn't used to be considered extra.

Our happiness as a family has been affected as we can no longer afford to socialise or take part in activities in the way we used to. This has been very isolating for my young children.

## Have you accessed any help/support? If so what service/organisation?

Cost of Living Hub -  
Portsmouth City  
Council Website.

No, because we still  
live from our own  
income. However,  
cost of living is  
always in the back  
of our minds.

Trying to get a Drs  
appointment is  
ridiculous.

I try to use as many free under 5  
groups like the Home-Start Stay &  
Play, The Parenting Network  
groups and sometimes church  
ones. I have had some good  
advice from Home-Start  
volunteers about other free  
activities for in the holidays and  
learnt about the cost of living hub.

Talking Change (think it's  
something different now?)

Food is really expensive so I shop  
around as much as I can. I don't  
want to use a food bank or know  
if I would even be allowed to.

## What other help/support would improve your situation?

Knowing what there is that would help a specific/my own situation.

Cheaper/more flexible childcare options.

A lot more information. Where to go if I need advice.

Sibling discounts and cheaper options for clubs/activities like swimming, football, dance, gym... we get told they are good for health and then can't do them.

Bills and prices in line with wages.

Childcare or jobs that don't need a lot of childcare.

Fund the NHS properly.



- **Qualitative research findings – quotes from survey, conversation & interviews:**

“close to Christmas we try to avoid family & friends as unable to afford food or presents as well as keeping the house warm when they visit. This puts a strain on us.”

“The worry is with the adults and we don't let it affect the children. We don't do as much as a family.”

“The increased prices of food and energy is crippling. Month on month trying to budget to ensure it lasts, then seeing the prices go up again is soul destroying.”

*“Money can't buy happiness, but a lack of it can definitely cause unhappiness.”*

“stress has caused him to suffer clenched jaw and stomach pains”

“as the sole provider (financially) he feels a lot of stress taking care of us all. His career decisions have been heavily influenced by the salary and less so his happiness in that role (lots more stressful days at work have led to stress at home).”

“We haven't been on holiday since before Covid. Families need a break especially if they are stressed and struggling. So we have booked during term time, only 3 days missed. Do my children not deserve fun and new experiences?”

- **Key findings:**

- Stress and worry were words that featured heavily throughout every aspect of the project and a sense of resignation that things aren't going to change.
- Trying to access health services is causing frustration.
- The 'types' of health often affect one another, so if you can alleviate stress, for example, other aspects of health and wellbeing are likely to improve. If physical illness is not being treated quickly and effectively, this can have a negative affect on emotional and mental health.
- Parents are trying to protect their children from being affected and feel guilty for not being able to pay for as many clubs and days out compared to previous years.
- Happiness is important to individuals and the family unit. Trying to achieve it shouldn't be seen as an act of entitlement or that it is a luxury for the few.

- **Actions in progress:**

Whilst carrying out my research I tried to learn about as many services available that might help participants and signposted accordingly.

I have set up a Community Research Facebook page so I can keep participants (and anyone else who is interested) up to date with both the project, useful information and any actions that happen as a result as well as posting information that might be useful –[Facebook](#)

I am sharing my research as much as possible. The NHS showcase was a fantastic opportunity to both present my report and use my poster as a visual representation of the project.

I also exhibited at the Relationships & Restorative Practice Conference ([Relational and Restorative Practice conference valuable opportunity to support the University of Portsmouth's civic agenda | University of Portsmouth](#)) and others have shared on my behalf at team meetings and events.

I am planning a celebration event to bring participants and stakeholders together at a local family hub.



<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61558644216288>



## IS THE CURRENT COST OF LIVING MAKING A DIFFERENCE TO THE HEALTH AND HAPPINESS OF PORTSMOUTH FAMILIES?



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Worrying about money all the time has had a negative impact on my mental and emotional health.



Money is always a worry - we're on one wage and even though it is well paid we still have to be thoughtful of spending in all aspects of our lives.

Less socialising/activities for kids. Free playgroups like the Home-Start ones are a godsend.

Trying to get a Drs appointment is ridiculous.

Our happiness as a family has been affected as we can no longer afford to socialise or take part in activities in the way we used to. This has been very isolating for my young children.

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SUPPORT  
Empower

BUILDING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

With thanks to the Portsmouth parents who took part, My Dog Sighs for allowing the use of his amazing work and everyone who has supported me along the way



- **Recommendations:**

Cost of living needs to be reduced or wages and benefits to increase.

Effective funding of the NHS both at local (particularly dentistry) and national level. Having attended a meeting regarding the new way GP surgeries are being run it's clear that more needs to be done to help the community make the best use of the system and for stakeholders to review the situation honestly.

Improve childcare/more family friendly ways of earning.

To support both individuals and the community in a holistic manner, including clearer information regarding what services/support are available and collaboration between organisations. Take happiness into account, not just ability to function.

Empower the community to help themselves and each other,

- **Reflections:**

This has been an opportunity to bring existing skills and knowledge to a new way of working and I am grateful to have been part of such a supportive cohort. Trainers, mentors and fellow researchers have all played a positive part in my journey. It has had challenges including the need to be adaptable and flexible and if I was to do it again I would have tried harder to make the focus group work and dive deeper into the subject matter, especially what happiness means to people. I would have the confidence to move forward more quickly and feel less rushed coming towards the end of the project. That said, I feel I have accomplished my objective to represent Portsmouth parents and look forward to sharing my work with the intention to action change. It has also opened up new opportunities for me professionally, both related to my original CPAR work and participating in new projects.

- **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank each Portsmouth parent who kindly took part, Amy Baines (Home-start Portsmouth), Kate McHendry & Andrew Paterson (Scottish Community Development Centre), Esther Oenga and colleagues (University of Reading), Gail Mann, Sam Graves & Rob Anderson-Weaver (Portsmouth City Council), Maze & Juliet (Hope Portsmouth), Joanne McEwan (NHS England), Laura Hyman (University of Portsmouth), [My Dog Sighs](#) who allowed the use of his amazing work, fellow researchers & my family. Literally couldn't have done it without you!

