

19<sup>th</sup> August 2020

# ‘Just about managing’ in Essex: Qualitative research in local government

## BritainThinks and Essex County Council

Webinar

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# Welcome

BritainThinks & Essex County Council

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# How to introduce yourself and take part in the roundtable discussion



**Introduce yourself to everyone using the chat**



**Ask a question at any point using the Q&A function**



**Raise your hand if you would rather ask a question out loud and we will unmute you**

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# Today's agenda

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McKinlay**

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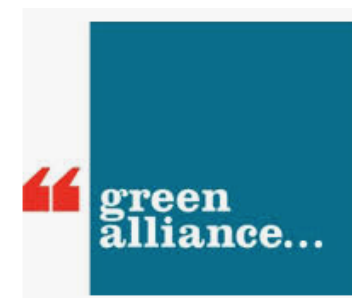


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# **Introduction to the research by Councillor Louise McKinlay**

Essex County Council



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# Key research findings

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## **There are four key points we will present today**

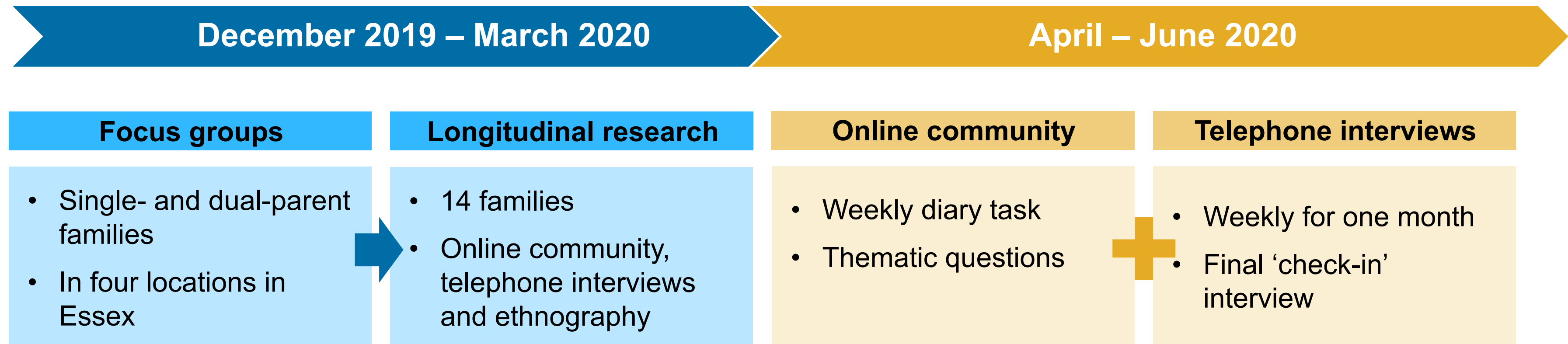
- 1 Ethnographic and digital/telephone longitudinal methodologies allowed us a uniquely rich insight into the lives, hopes and fears of JAM families over time.**
- 2 JAM families are not homogeneous. They entered lockdown in different positions of financial strength, and the crisis has increased inequality within the sample.**
- 3 JAM parents prioritise their children's happiness, so keeping them entertained and emotionally well during lockdown often superseded home-schooling.**
- 4 JAM parents have limited 'headspace' to think beyond the here and now, and coronavirus exacerbated their feeling that the future is out of their control.**

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1

**Ethnographic and digital/telephone longitudinal methodologies allowed us a uniquely rich insight into the lives, hopes and fears of JAM families over time.**

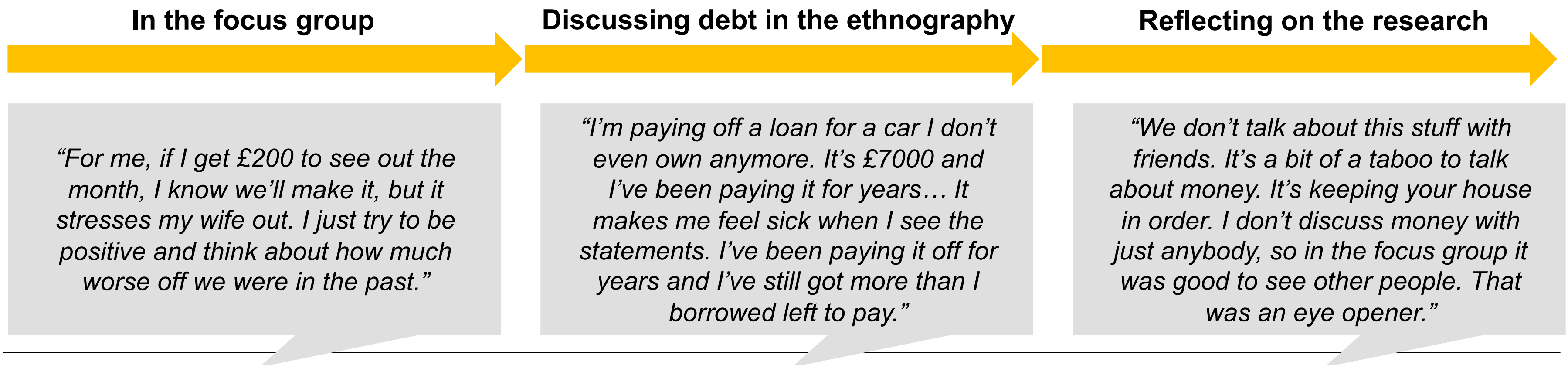
# We conducted qualitative research over six months, tracking the experiences of 14 families before and during lockdown





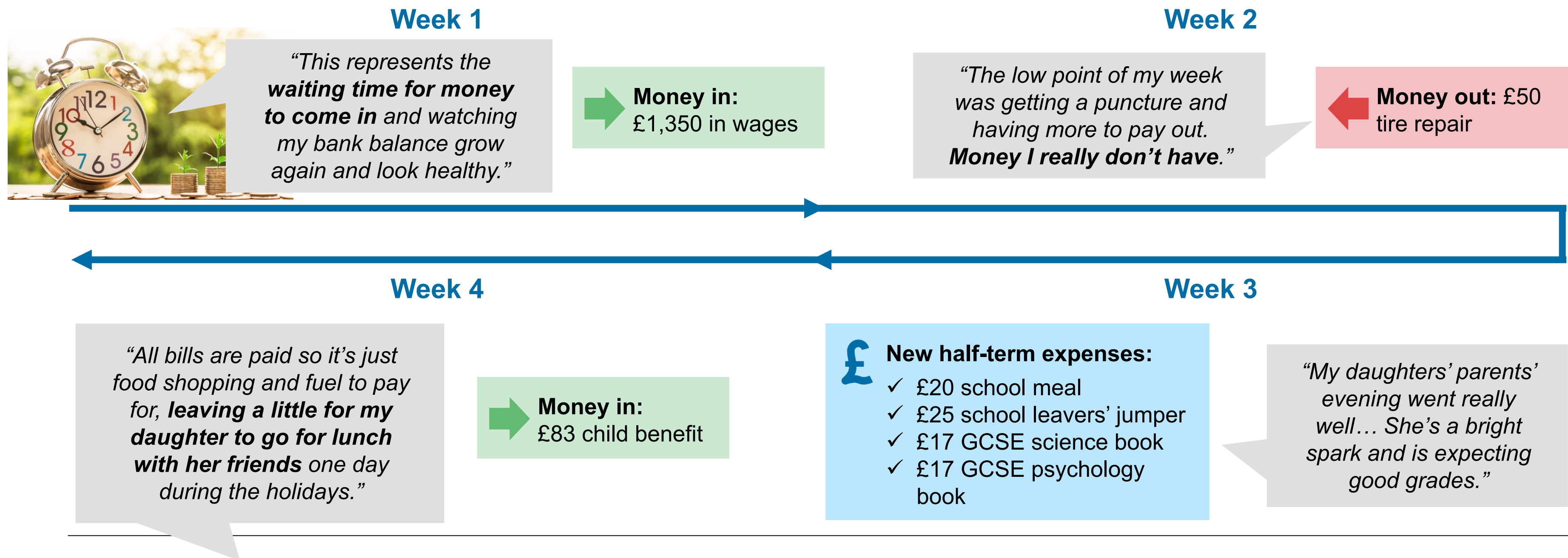
# Ethnography was key to broaching sensitive topics and learning more about participants than they revealed in the focus groups

In the first focus group, Joseph\* described his 'positive' approach to money and seemed one of the more relaxed participants in the group. When discussing debt in greater details in the ethnographic interviews, however, Joseph revealed he was paying off debts which made him feel 'sick'. He later reflected on taking part in the project and said that seeing other people in the same situation had been 'eye-opening'.



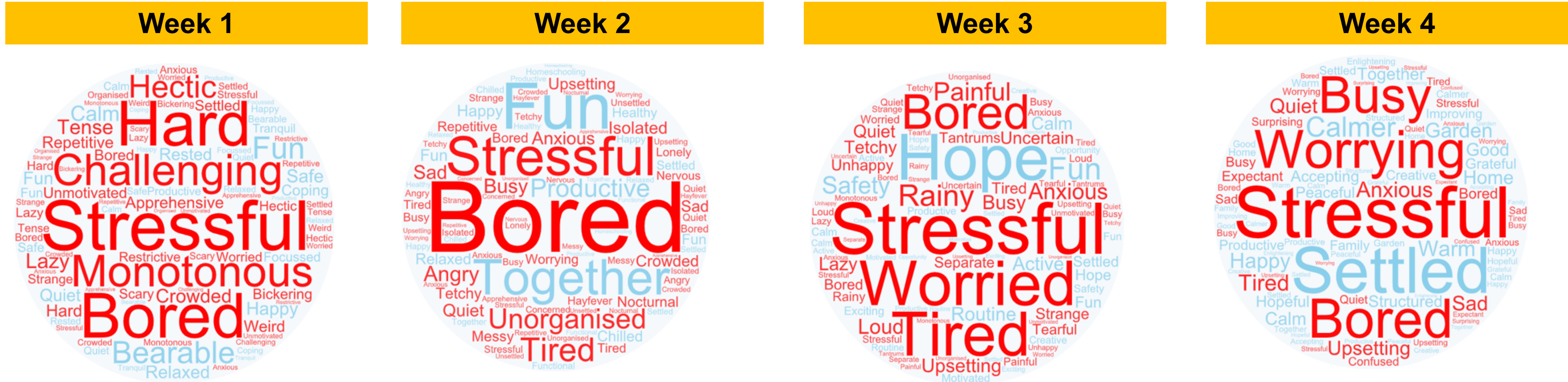
# Using longitudinal research with a low-income audience allowed us to track the uneven rhythm of household finances over time

## One participant's payments diary during February 2020:



# It gave us a close understanding of the emotional experience of these families during lockdown

Online diary responses during April 2020:  
*What 3 words would you use to describe life in your household this week?*

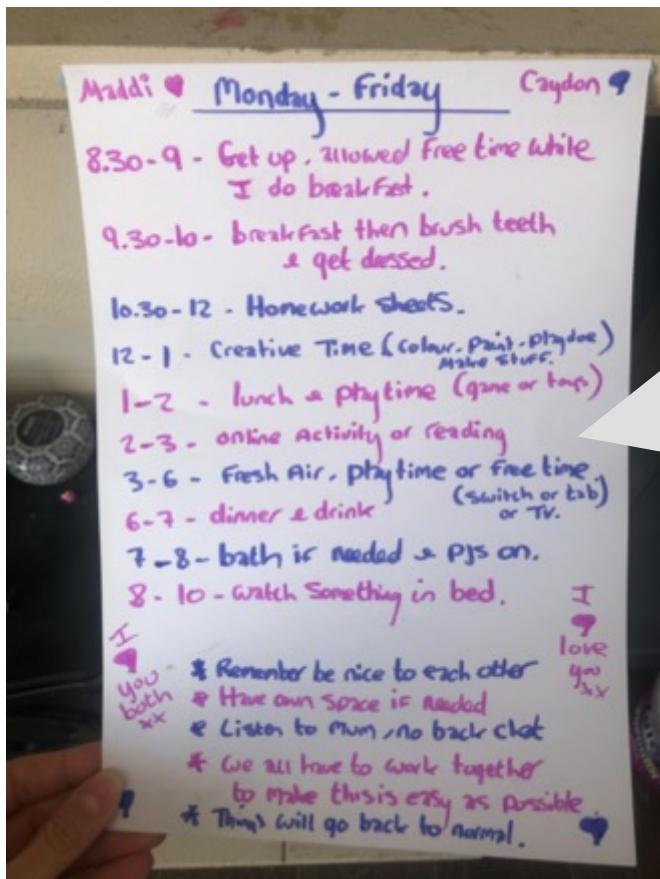


Stress was a constant for most. In the weekly telephone interviews we saw this move from stress about the risk of infection through to stress about other aspects of life such as finances and the future



# Over the course of lockdown, we saw parents move from being full of good intentions and energy to feeling demotivated

## Week 1



*"I did this schedule one week into lockdown... It benefits me and the kids to have a routine."*

(Single parent, Harlow)

## Week 4

*"We struggled doing schoolwork this week. My little chart hasn't been followed... They don't want to do it. I'm not motivated to get them to try to do it. It's still confusing as to what they have to do. I'm getting links to different websites that they could learn from but there's nothing actually set for them."*

(Single parent, Harlow)



# **Remote methods allowed us and participants to take a creative approach to capturing qualitative data**

**We encouraged participants to upload pictures expressing their situation...**

***Upload a picture that sums up how you feel about your finances:***



*“We are stuck... My partner doesn’t qualify for the government assistance for self-employed people... So Universal Credit is the only option.”*

*(Dual parent, Colchester)*

**...and to give their children opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings**

***What do your children have to say about coronavirus and school closures? Encourage them to answer in their own words:***

*“GCSEs? Cancelled. Nearly five years of studying and it almost feels like it was for nothing. Sure, we’ll still get grades, but is that a true reflection of what we can do? These grades will be a reflection of our performance in the past, and not in the present. Is that fair?”*

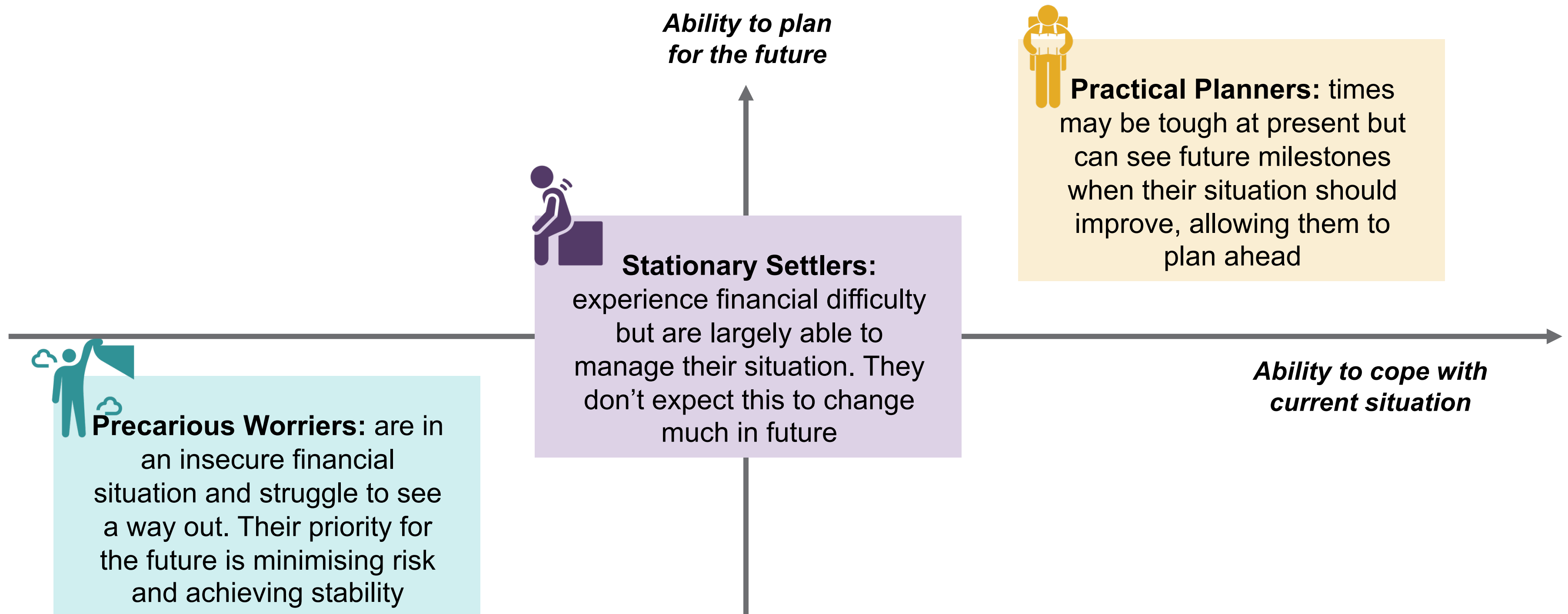
*(GCSE student writing in the online community)*

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**JAM families are not homogeneous. They entered lockdown in different positions of financial strength, and the crisis has increased inequality within the sample.**

# Before coronavirus, our research showed that JAM families were not a homogeneous group, but typically fell into one of 3 typologies



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## Yet the financial impact of the crisis was uneven across these groups





# Lockdown led to immediate hardship for some, while others were relatively protected. Work and employment dictated their situation

Feeling the pain	Fine for now	Secure
Self-employed for under a year	Furloughed on 80%	Employed & WFH
Freelancers	Self-employed	Key workers
Zero-hour contracts		Furloughed on 100%



**Those in insecure or casual work were in immediate trouble, with some ‘falling through the cracks’ and failing to qualify for government support, including:**

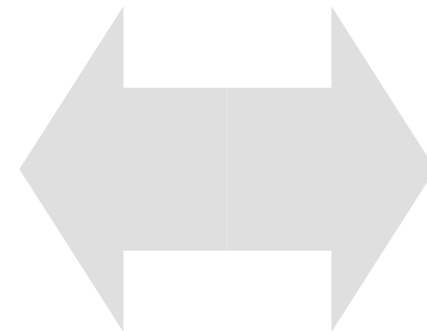
- Self-employed for under a year
- Between jobs or on temporary contracts which ended as lockdown began
- Agency workers – approaches taken by agencies varied within our sample: some agencies furloughed their staff while others did not

# Leading to vastly divergent experiences between those who were secure for now, and those who fell through the cracks

## Case study: Danielle\*

*"I'm just in the same process of looking for work, applying, calling, doing interviews. There's just not much to apply for, this is the problem."*

Danielle was previously getting by from month to month but, three weeks prior to lockdown, moved to a new role she found through an agency. When lockdown began, her contract was put on hold without pay, before the company ended it entirely. The agency did not furlough contracted workers or offer other financial support.



## Case study: Jake\*

*"I've got a desk set up in the corner of the lounge The kids are finding that annoying because they have to be quiet, but we're lucky I'm still working."*

Before lockdown Jake had no savings and was struggling to make ends meet due to the cost of commuting to London each day for his customer service job with a utilities company. During lockdown, however, he worked from home and saw his outgoings reduce considerably, meaning he was able to save £2000 during the first two months.

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**3**

**JAM parents prioritise their children's happiness, so keeping them entertained and emotionally well during lockdown often superseded home-schooling.**

# Isolating their children from the worst effects of their financial situation was often the priority for the parents of JAM families

- Family time was often chosen as the highlight of each week in the online diaries during the first phase of research
- JAM parents described trying their best to protect their children from the negative effects of their financial situation
- Some described the pressure of needing to 'keep up with' other families and the pressure to be 'perfect' parents



## Case study: Liz\*

*"How could I tell her that I couldn't afford the £200 for the flights? I just felt too guilty. I couldn't do that to her. So I paid it but I really couldn't afford to."*

Liz is a single parent of a teenage daughter. The family of one of her daughter's closest friends invited her daughter on holiday to France with them and offered to cover all costs apart from the flights. Although Liz could not spare the £200 cost of tickets, she felt too guilty to say no, and paid for her to go even though it meant cutting back in other areas that month.



# During lockdown, parents tried to minimise the emotional stress on their children – and were concerned about them getting ill

*Upload a picture that sums up your week:*



*“On Friday we decided to have a bit of an impromptu party night and we had some drinks and put on loud music and all danced around the living room... The kids needed it, they’re in their rooms a lot so it felt good to be social.”*

(Dual parent, Basildon)

- Parents wanted to ensure that the family enjoyed their increased time spent together. They did not want their children to feel that a difficult situation was compounded by pressure or stress at home
- They were also fearful of the health risks to their children, despite being aware that children were at lower risk overall

*“My biggest concern is going to work and bringing the virus home. I don’t want to see my children be unwell.”*

(Single parent, Harlow)

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## Education was therefore not a high priority and home-schooling was patchy

### Most parents of JAM families:

Did not want to add to the stress of their children

*“We have to protect her because she already doesn’t like hearing about the deaths.”*  
(Dual parent, Harlow)

Found home schooling challenging

*“Sometimes I just need a break myself. We are not teachers and we are not child psychologists.”*  
(Single parent, Basildon)

Did not have access to usual support

*“He’d usually be going to his nan’s every Wednesday as well as nursery twice a week.”*  
(Dual parent, Basildon)

This suggests that some children will be at a disadvantage upon the return to school, and that lockdown will likely contribute to an increasing attainment gap – even within this cohort

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## Parents also struggled to maintain their children's healthy eating, physical activity and screen time as time went on



Parents relied more and more on treats to motivate their children



Children's enthusiasm for daily family walks and exercise waned quickly



Increasing tendency in older children to stay in their rooms/spend all their time on screens

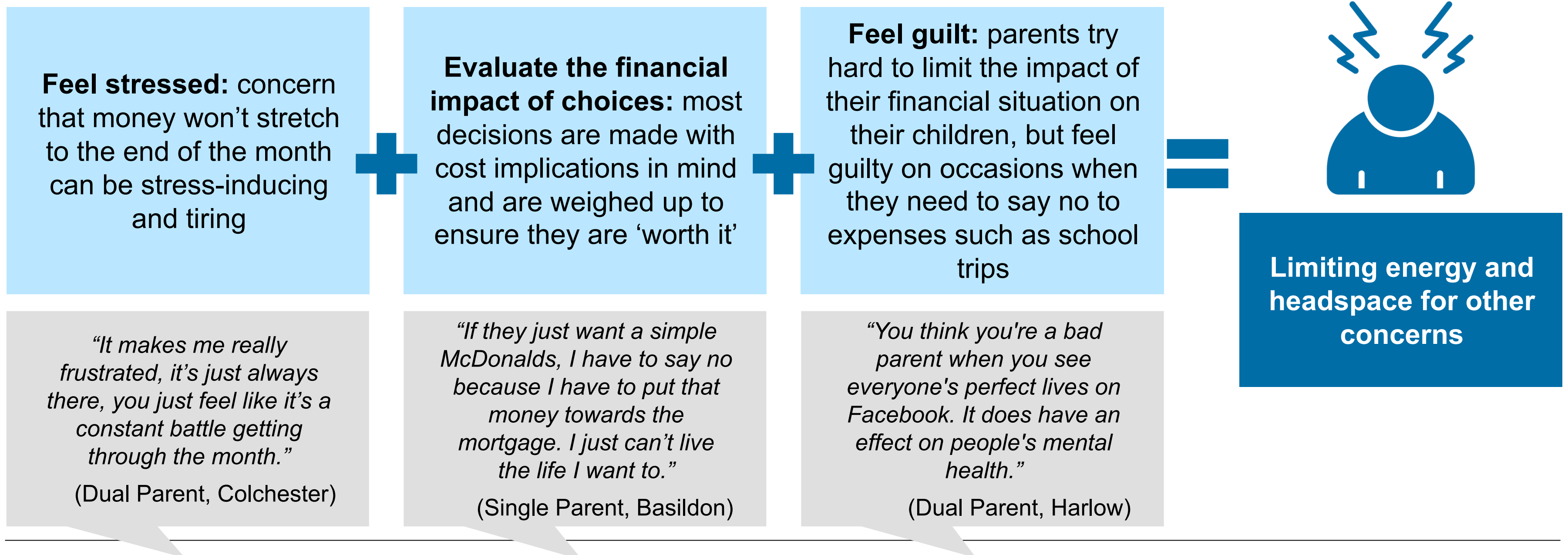
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**4**

**JAM parents have limited ‘headspace’ to think beyond the here and now, and coronavirus exacerbated their feeling that the future is out of their control.**

# Getting by on a limited income limits the ‘headspace’ parents have for thinking beyond the here and now

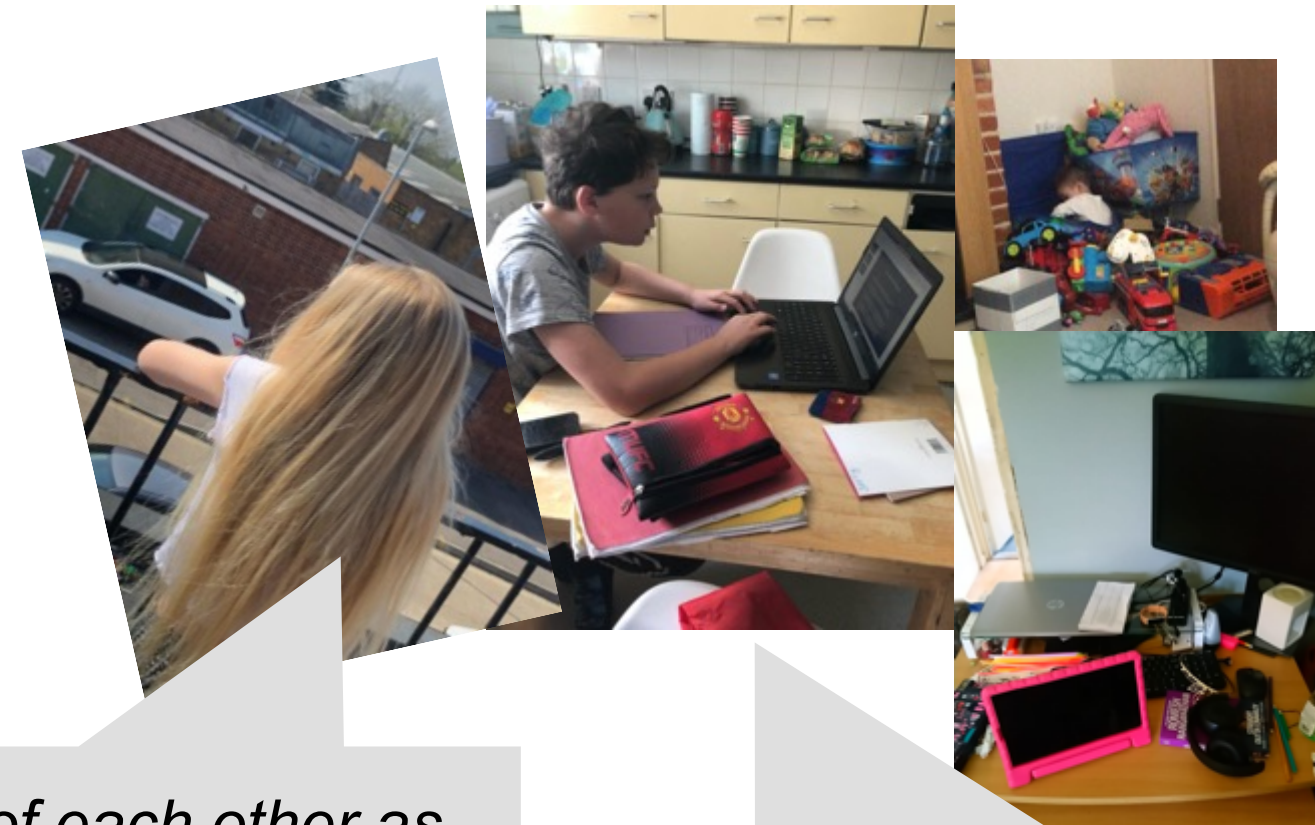
## The parents in JAM families:





# But lockdown did not free up as much space to think as might have been expected – life still crowded in!

- The need to juggle work and childcare and the inability to access usual support networks meant that lockdown felt more stressful than ever for most JAM families
- Crowded housing situations and the competing priorities of work and home-schooling led many to feel they were getting on top of each other



*"We are on top of each other as we are over-crowded."*  
(Single parent, Harlow)

*"Space has always been an issue in our home... It feels cramped."*  
(Dual parent, Chelmsford)

# In fact the lockdown turned all parents into ‘short term’ planners as it became increasingly difficult to know what the future held

We previously found stark differences in the extent to which JAM families felt able to think about and plan for the future:



**Precarious Worriers:** previously focused on minimising risk for the future and were limited in how far they felt able to plan ahead



**Stationary Settlers:** felt it was unlikely that much would change in their lives but were reasonably happy to ‘keep on keeping on’



**Practical Planners:** had milestones in their future that they were working toward and expected some small improvements in their circumstances

**But all are now focused on the short term.** Even those whose circumstances have remained stable throughout lockdown are unsure of what may change in future

# Their priorities for now are keeping children occupied and finding stable work for themselves – but much feels uncertain



## Keeping children occupied over the summer

*"We want to have fun but we're not really going to make changes. We wanted to go to the Lake District. But so do half the country probably."*

(Single parent, Colchester)

## Retaining or finding stable work

*"It's all hinging on our jobs. I chose a career in primary education, but that might be stopped. I might have to do whatever job I can find."*

(Dual parent, Chelmsford)

**But most simply didn't know the situation they or the country could be in over the next few months**

*"I don't know. My one-year plan is on pause... We need to wait until we're settled, and things are back to normal."*

(Single parent, Harlow)

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## A reminder of our four key points

- 1** Ethnographic and digital/telephone longitudinal methodologies allowed us a uniquely rich insight in the lives, hope and fears of JAM families over time.
- 2** JAM families are not homogeneous. They entered lockdown in different positions of financial strength, and the crisis has increased inequality within the sample.
- 3** JAM parents prioritise their children's happiness, so keeping them entertained and emotionally well during lockdown often superseded home-schooling.
- 4** JAM parents have limited 'headspace' to think beyond the here and now, and coronavirus exacerbated their feeling that the future is out of their control.

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# Response from Essex County Council

Essex County Council



## The value of qualitative research

- The research enabled us to gain a **rich, in-depth insight into families' lives** in a way that can't be provided through a survey or statistical data alone.
  - **Getting underneath the 'JAM' label** and truly understanding what day-to-day life is like for these families – their motivations, attitudes, challenges, hopes and aspirations.
- Reporting and deliverables from the research such as case studies, quotes and videos, helped to **bring the insights to life** and make it real for the project team and our senior stakeholders and decision-makers.
- The **typologies** which emerged from the research were a really helpful way of highlighting that there is **significant variation** among the JAM cohort in terms of their circumstances and attitudes/behaviours around planning for the future.

***“Giving a voice to the people makes the findings much more powerful when you can see the real impact on people's lives.”***

**[Project team member]**

***“The research clearly demonstrated that the group are not homogeneous and therefore a suite of policy approaches will be needed.”***

**[Project team member]**

**The research was key in challenging some of our initial assumptions, for example:**

- “Some families are JAM because childcare is taking up a significant % of their income.”
  - Research showed us that for most JAM families, formal childcare is prohibitively expensive, meaning they are not typically accessing it and are instead relying on informal support networks, and fitting working hours around children.
  - This has implications for the way we respond to families’ needs.
- “JAM families are in low-paid, insecure work, and aspirations are low.”
  - Employment type, levels of aspiration and attitudes around planning for the future vary significantly across the three typologies identified.
  - The research highlights that many JAM families are in stable, long-term jobs in well respected sectors, but there may be barriers to progression, and pay may remain insufficient to meet family’s needs.

***“It was refreshing for the insight to challenge our assumptions,  
as it means the policies we develop are more likely to be truly  
helpful and focused on the right problems.”***

**[Project team member]**

## Providing an evidence base to inform policy development

- The Covid-19 pandemic prompted us to ‘**pause and rethink**’ about the needs of these families now, and on our planned approach to respond to the challenges they face.
- The additional research helped us to understand the impact of the pandemic and lockdown, which informed our **immediate policy response**. This involved developing a package of support for families over the summer holidays, as this period was identified as an immediate challenge for many.

*“Having a research partner and participants that were so willing to take on the challenge of continuing the research during the pandemic gave us an opportunity to be aware faster and act faster to emerging challenges, and to test where the needs of our populations may be different from the national picture.” [Project team member]*

- As a project team (inc. colleagues from research, equalities, and strategy) we undertook a process of building a long-list of **policy ideas for the medium-longer term**, based on key themes from the research.

All ideas were then ‘**scored**’ to identify to what extent they were insight led, relevant, scalable, and flexible, as well as anticipated costs and impact.

- This resulted in a **short-list of the highest scoring ideas** which we developed further through engaging with our multi-disciplinary group and SME colleagues across the organisation.
- Idea refinement is ongoing, alongside a process of developing problem statements and mapping user needs, ensuring policy ideas are aligned to research.

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# Questions and roundtable discussion

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# Thank you

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