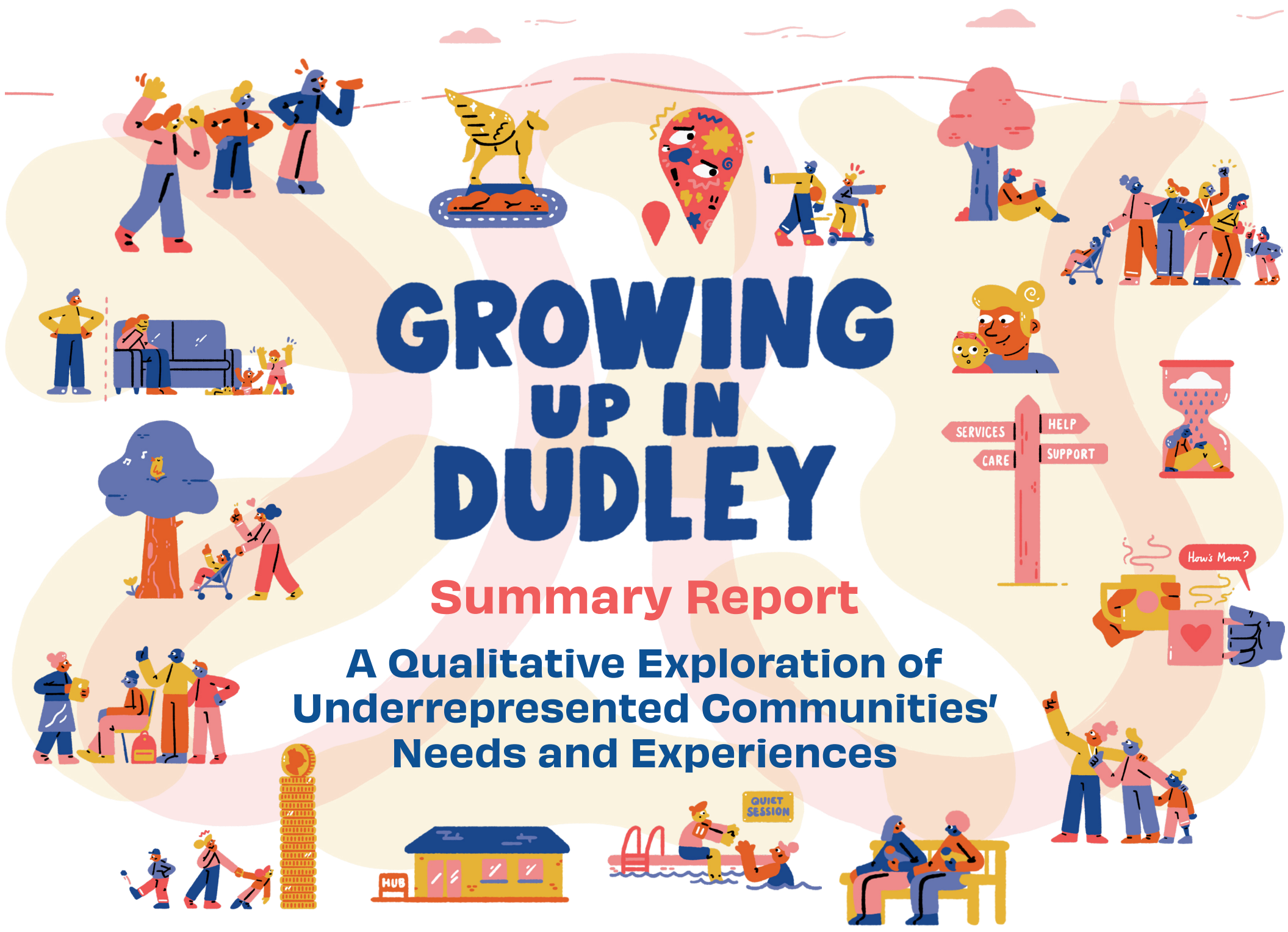


GROWING UP IN DUDLEY

Summary Report

A Qualitative Exploration of Underrepresented Communities' Needs and Experiences



Foreword from Dudley Council

As a council we are committed to working with local organisations, partners, professionals and an array of communities to help make Dudley a place where everyone can live longer, safer, healthier lives. How we plan to do this is set out in our Health & Wellbeing Strategy, which highlights the goals we have agreed to improve the lives of people living and working in Dudley. A large part of this is to ask and hear the voices of local people to help us improve and deliver services that are effective, fit for purpose and accessible for local communities, families and young people across Dudley.

To do this in an informed way, in December 2022, we commissioned Frame, who are an innovative, creative, and passionate company, to connect and engage with the children, young people, parents/ carers, and service providers to truly discover what it is like to live and grow up in Dudley today. Our aim was to go further than previous traditional consultation methods, really getting to the heart of the child and family's journey and being able to report back on this journey using modern and accessible technology.

We are delighted to now share the findings of this work in this report. Whilst this report gives us valuable insight into Dudley's families' and children's feelings, this is not the end of our journey as we want to continue the conversation of improvement. The findings here are a starting point for the next chapter to further develop and shape services to support the wellbeing needs of the populations we serve.

Dr Mayada Abuaffan
Director of Public Health and Wellbeing

Acknowledgements

This report was commissioned by Dudley Council Public Health and Wellbeing Directorate. The purpose was to gather lived experience of children, young people, new parents and families on what it is like to live and grow up in Dudley. The report provides a 'narrow and deep' qualitative insight, rather than a 'wide and shallow' quantitative or representative view of the whole borough.

The research was undertaken and written by Frame, who worked with partners across Dudley. We would like to thank them for their energy, passion and creativity that they brought to this work.

We would like to thank the Dudley Health & Care Partnership for their financial contributions to this work, which without them, would not have been possible.

Finally, we would like to give special thanks to all those who gave their time, commitment, and honesty to take part in this research, including fellow professionals, community groups, families, and young people of Dudley.



Introduction

Growing Up in Dudley is a series of community conversations commissioned by Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (DMBC). The findings of this qualitative needs assessment, which took place between January and September 2023, provide rich insights into the experiences of parents, children and young people in Dudley, especially in the context of a post-Covid-19 pandemic and an ongoing cost-of-living crisis. The report is based on extensive conversations with 223 people. It highlights what is working well, what is lacking and what is needed to improve their wellbeing. The report is a valuable resource for policymakers, service providers and community organisations to improve services and support the wellbeing of children, young people and their families.

Key findings



Loneliness, isolation and challenges accessing support

New parents and parents with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) often struggle to access services and support and feel “passed from pillar to post.” Dads’ support needs are often overlooked and there are limited options for them to meet and interact with other dads. Young people often feel stuck at home in their bedrooms because there’s nowhere to go. They often don’t know where to find help and say the support that schools offer varies widely. Young people are embarrassed about asking for help or advice about their mental and sexual health.

Hard to find information

Knowing where to go for information and advice can be difficult and frustrating. Often, people rely on family, friends and social media. Moms¹ often turn to Facebook groups and Mumsnet for parenting advice and information about local groups and activities. They say website content is often out of date and unreliable. Parents of children with SEND mainly rely on carer peers and charities. Young people rely on their schools and their parents for information, but success is mixed. Teenagers often feel there's an information gap post-school. They say that a lot of relevant and interesting information is under-advertised, such as the PRIDE event and the disabled bus pass scheme for young people.



Not feeling heard

Parents, carers and young people often feel their feelings and opinions are overlooked by services and support systems. Young first-time parents often feel patronised, judged and belittled. Parents with children with SEND say they have "to fight" for a diagnosis and practical support. Young people feel that their schools often don't understand their needs, especially around mental health issues and bullying, and that Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) offer treatments but don't listen. Young people with SEND often feel excluded and want more opportunities for their voices to influence decisions about their lives, future and communities.



¹ Throughout the report we use 'moms' rather than mothers or mums, as this is how the majority of people we spoke to described themselves and others.



A lack of inclusive, engaging and affordable activities

Dudley has great options for entertaining younger children but lacks safe outdoor play spaces, inclusive social spaces and engaging activities, particularly for older children and teenagers. Parents with children with SEND say local activities don't cater to their children's needs, and are at unsuitable times. Low-income families and single parents with several children struggle to afford leisure and recreational activities like swimming or sports. Young people say there's nowhere to go and nothing to do. They hang out with friends at fast-food restaurants but say it's unhealthy and expensive. They are frustrated that gym equipment in parks is often out of use and nets on sports pitches and courts are broken or covered in glass. Older young people say there's nothing age-appropriate they can afford to do.

Safety concerns in public spaces

Safety in public areas was a prominent issue, affecting the wellbeing and freedom of children and young people in Dudley. Parents worry about their children's safety now and in the future. Young people avoid local places and spaces they'd like to use and adapt their behaviours to avoid danger. Young women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, or asexual (LGBTQ+) young people feel unsafe and regularly experience harassment in their daily lives. Parents and young people alike notice a lack of police presence and poor lighting in Dudley's towns, which attracts antisocial behaviour and crime.





Mental health needs

Mental health support is identified as a critical need across all age groups. New moms feel there is little support available, especially if their support needs are lower level and they mostly need a helping hand to manage parenting anxieties, build their self-esteem and confidence. New dads often struggle with poor mental health but say there is no option to get help. Care leavers and trauma-experienced² parents have additional barriers to seeking help and need additional support. Parents with children with SEND are constantly exhausted and often have poor mental health but do not feel able to prioritise their own needs in their struggle to manage day-to-day life. Children and young people struggle at points of transition in their lives and feel under pressure throughout their teenage years. Their mental health needs are diverse, but they feel there is little support available that practically understands their psychological and emotional needs. When unsure where to turn, young people often internalise – with some saying they self-soothe with drugs and alcohol.

Community voice and representation

The report identifies a gap in services that do not fully reflect the voices and experiences of children, young people and parents, especially from marginalised or vulnerable groups. The people who took part in Growing Up in Dudley said the opportunity to share their experiences was rare and yet valuable. They want more opportunities to have their say and influence services and systems that affect their lives.



² Trauma is a lasting emotional response that results from experiencing or witnessing a distressing event that is out of our control during childhood or adulthood. For example, violence, assault, the death of a close friend or family member or racism and other types of hatred.

Priorities for action

The report highlights what parents, carers, children and young people think is missing and needed in Dudley and outlines the priority actions for addressing the key findings:

Making information and support more accessible

Develop more accessible services and support for parents, especially including dads and families with SEND children. Parents want more opportunities to meet peers in similar circumstances and to create support networks. They want earlier support with a SEND diagnosis and referral and clear referral pathways to joined-up services. All young people want support that meets their needs without stigma or shame, and to feel heard.

Offering more inclusive mental health support

Make mental health services more accessible to parents and young people by creating better access to information and more tailored support. For example, creating a support offer for new dads or a tailored approach with trauma-experienced new parents to reduce barriers to support. Understand more about the gaps in mental health provision for young people, at schools and within the community, and why young people feel there are “helpers, not healers” – services that offer support but don’t meet young people’s needs.



Supporting SEND families

Families with SEND children need more streamlined support and clearer communication between various services. They need easier access to information and more support around seeking a diagnosis and getting practical support. Parents of SEND children need better mental health support. They also want more visibility and say in the design of services that affect their families.



Develop inclusive, affordable spaces and activities

Create more inclusive and engaging social spaces and activities for children and teenagers, including families with children with SEND, who are often simultaneously caring for children with additional needs and their siblings. Parents want to get their children off screens and into fresh air. They want more investment in grassroots sports and outdoor play. Young people want safe spaces to socialise and escape the pressure of school without judgement. Some, especially those with siblings with SEND or chaotic family lives, want a safe space to escape home for a while.

Focus on community safety

Address safety concerns in parks, town centres, and other public areas to improve the living conditions for young residents. Start community conversations with parents, young people and diverse stakeholders, including service providers, charities, community groups, youth workers, and the police, about what's needed and possible across the Borough.

Provide easily accessible information

Families want a central hub for reliable, up-to-date information on available local services and activities. Parents say they miss Family Centres but families are unaware of their local Family Hubs.

Support people to increase their physical and mental health and wellbeing

Enable people of all ages to care for their physical and mental health and wellbeing through community connection with peers and exercise. Parents want affordable exercise classes they can take their babies to (or with a crèche offer). They also want places and activities to get them out of the house, provide structure to their day and offer support through social contact and peer support. Young people often manage anxiety and low mood through sports and gym workouts and want affordable ways to exercise.



Deepen engagement and coproduce services and support

Adults, children and young people want to feel heard and respected, and they want to play an active role in shaping the policies and services that affect them. Ensure that community services and policies are developed with direct input from both adults and young people. Across conversations, people of all ages and backgrounds valued the opportunity Growing Up in Dudley created for them to share their stories and feel heard. Minority groups especially feel that their views and voices are underrepresented and want more visibility.

Conclusion

Growing Up in Dudley provides valuable insights for creating a more inclusive, supportive and responsive environment for children, young people and their parents in the Dudley Borough. By addressing the report's priorities for action in partnership with the community and other stakeholders, Dudley can become a leading example in nurturing and supporting its youngest residents to thrive and meet their potential, ensuring a community that values and meets their diverse needs.

