At Home with Children: Learning from Lockdown

Interim Findings Report: Interviews

June 2022

Interim findings of the At Home with Children Research Project,

Authors: At Home with Children Research Team
Newcastle University: Rosie Parnell (PI), Husam Abo Kanon (RA), Emily Pattinson (RA), Alkistis Pitsikali (RA)
University of Dundee: Sandra Costa Santos (Co-I), Heba Sarhan (RA)

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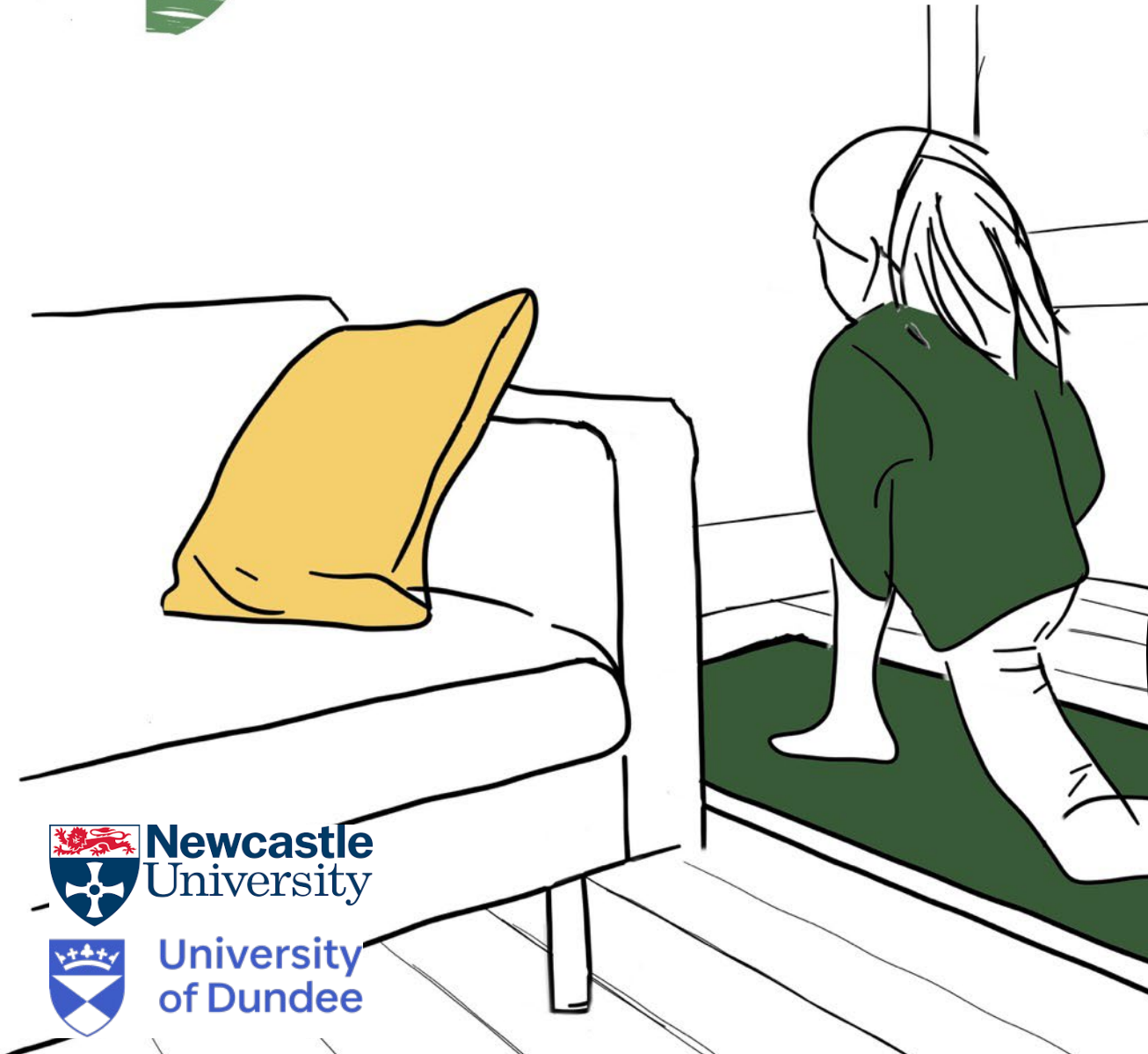
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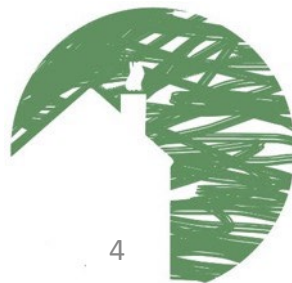
At Home with Children: Learning from Lockdown

- This report summarises findings of 45 interviews with families, conducted between September and December 2021.

- We talked to families about what activities they did where in their home, what challenges they faced with their domestic space and how they adapted their domestic space and its use to meet their needs. 10-15 minutes of the 1 hour interview was allotted specifically to speaking with the children or young people in the family (under 18 years) about their experience.

- The project will share the tactics and home adaptations that families have found helpful, through a 'Home Hack Toolkit', so that others can directly benefit from these ideas. Our findings and recommendations will also target housing policy and professionals in family support roles, identifying the settings and scenarios that present the greatest challenges to families.

- The project is funded by the UKRI Covid-19 Rapid Research Fund via the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/V014943/1]

Summary of Findings

Key Findings: The Lockdown Home

- The Lockdown Home was shaped by the often conflicting needs of individual family members (especially adult v child).

- Adaptations to space - including changed use, rearranging furniture, compartmentalising – and to family routines in space, helped to address some of the conflicting needs and reduced tensions in some cases.

- Particularly difficult to accommodate were homeworking, adult leisure and adult alone time, or withdrawal.

- Children's need for proximity to an adult for support or companionship, as well as adults' need to supervise younger children, conflicted with adults' need for withdrawal for mental wellbeing and for concentration while working from home. The existing spaces of the home rarely mediated this conflict.

- Looked at from the child's perspective, adults' need for focused, undisturbed work space conflicted with children's need for companionship and support for their mental wellbeing.

Key Findings: Well-Being and Space

- Adults found multi-use (and open-plan) spaces particularly difficult, e.g. the living room (where play lived and its 'mess' remained), the adult bedroom (when used for homeworking) and the dining table (with multiple conflicting uses).

- Children disliked busy spaces and areas with constant circulation.

- Having access to a garden, adequate space, storage and enough separate rooms were the main factors perceived by householders to be associated with positive wellbeing.

- As well as lack of access to a garden and insufficient space, householders also associated negative wellbeing with: multi-use spaces; lack of designated space (e.g. for work); and home layouts which caused 'interference' between different spaces.

Introduction

Aim:
To understand what 'liveable' domestic space means for families with children under pandemic conditions

England and Scotland

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In this report the findings of the interviews, grouped into the following key themes:

- Demographics

- Dwelling Profile

- Who did what where?

- Important Places, Difficult Places

- Challenges to Liveability

- Home space and wellbeing

- Adaptations

- Adaptions for wellbeing

Methodology

The At Home with Children Project

Phase 1 - Surveys

Photo Survey

Exploratory analysis of photographs in the public domain showing spatial micro-interventions/adaptations made in homes during the pandemic

Online Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was completed by families across England and Scotland about their satisfaction with their home, along with any challenges they faced and changes they made during lockdown

Phase 2 – Family Interviews

Interviews with families exploring the way they used their home during lockdown and how they felt it impacted their wellbeing

Phase 3 – Focus Groups

Design-based focus groups to engage members of different households in co-developing and refining a set of design ideas and tools to improve the liveability of domestic spaces according to 'challenge scenarios' and housing types

Method: Semi-structured interviews

Interviews

45 group interviews with families (separate households including children/young people under 18 years old) were conducted between September and December 2021, online using Microsoft Teams.

Themes

The interviews were in three parts:
Part 1 explored how families used and adapted their homes during lockdown, which spaces were most important to them and which didn't work for them.
Part 2 focused on family well-being and its perceived relationship to home space.
Part 3 was dedicated to talking to children about how they used their home during lockdown, including their favourite place to be and anywhere they didn't like to be.

Materials

Prior to the interview, families were invited to take photographs of spaces in their home that were important, difficult or changed during lockdown. A semi-structured interview guide was used to encourage all household members to discuss their photos and share experiences of their home during lockdown. Children and young people were also invited to use a workbook to draw and/or write about their experiences of the home and to talk through this. All family members could also use the workbook to share anything they wanted to communicate after the the interview.

Participants

All household members were invited to attend the group interview. Some older children chose to contribute through the workbook rather than attend the interview.

Interview Findings

Key areas:

- **Demographics**

- **Dwelling Profile**

- **Who did what where?**

- **Important Places, Difficult Places**

- **Challenges to Liveability**

- **Home space and wellbeing**

- **Adaptations**

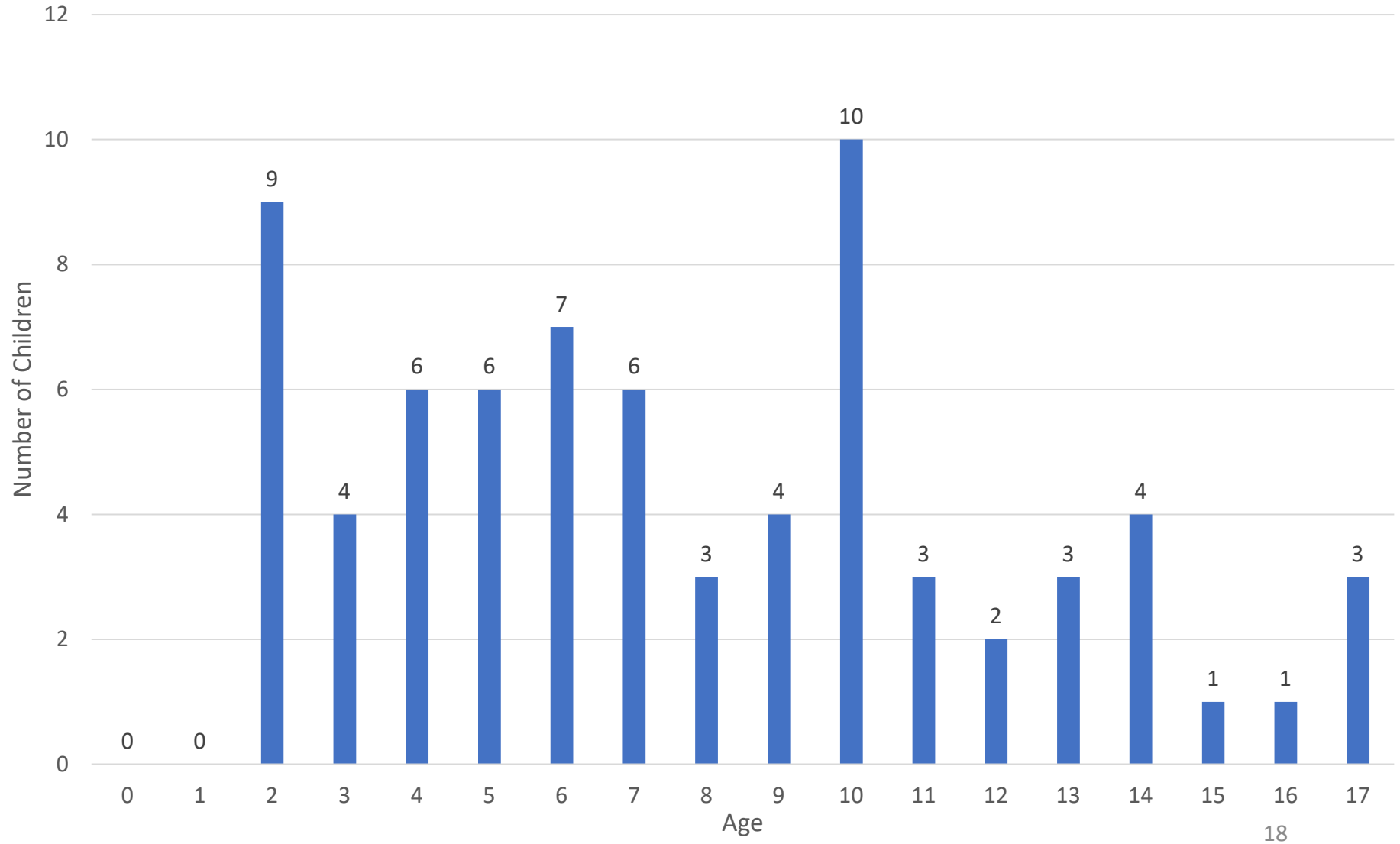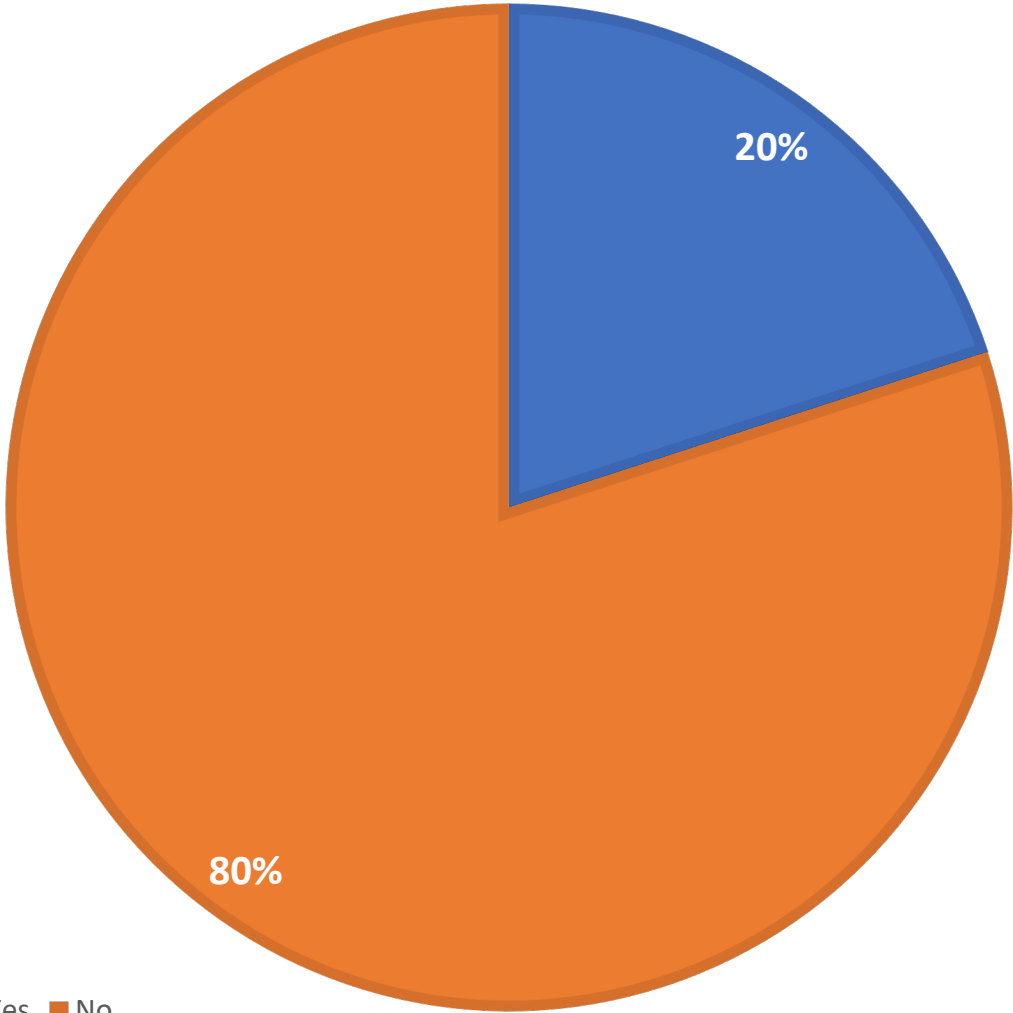- **Adaptions for wellbeing**

Demographics

Participants

45 families representing a total of:

- 85 adults

- 73 children

- 'Average' family =
2 adults +
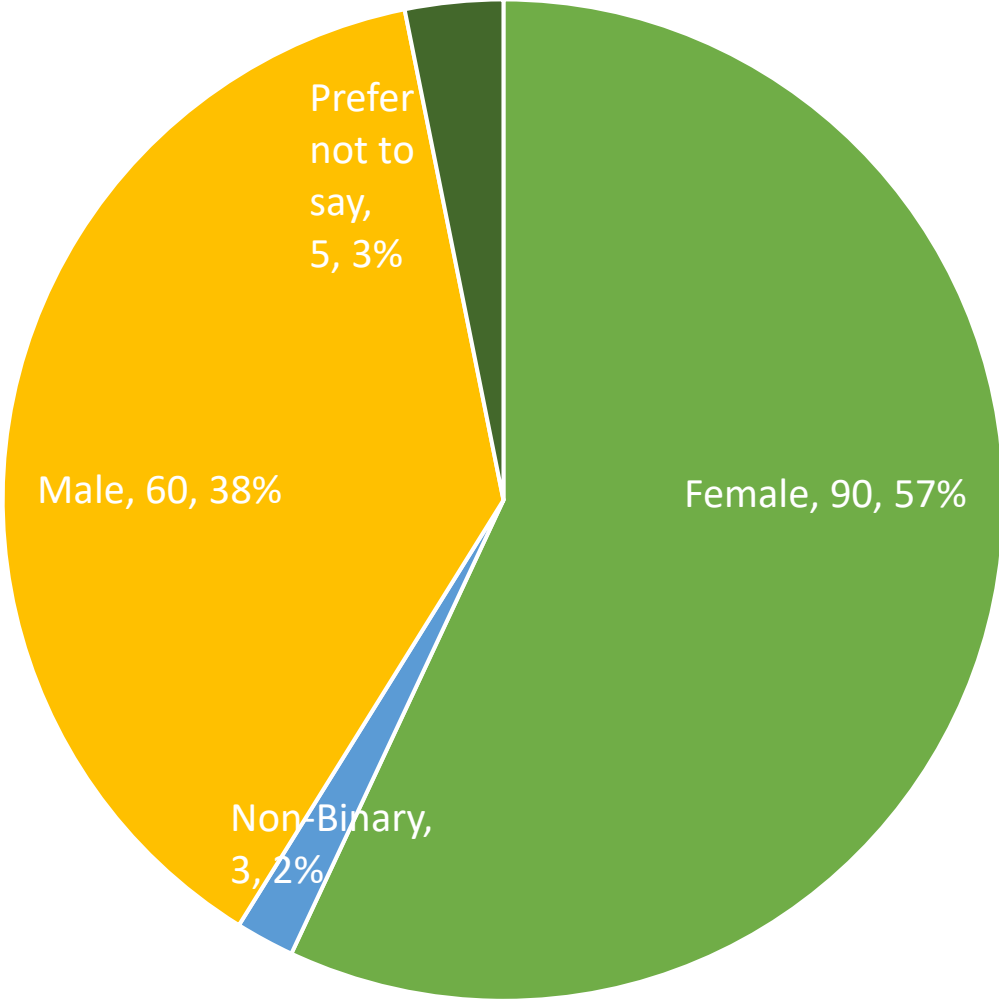2 children

SAMPLE BY CHILD AGE

SAMPLE BY CHILD SEN NEEDS

SAMPLE BY GENDER IDENTITY

20%

80%

■ Yes ■ No

Prefer not to say, 5, 3%

Male, 60, 38%

Female, 90, 57%

Non-Binary, 3, 2%

■ Female ■ Non-Binary ■ Male ■ Prefer not to say

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ETHNICITY

122 — White/White British
30 — Other Ethnic Group
6 — Prefer not to say

- Asian/Asian British: 5
- Black/Black British: 8
- Chinese/Chinese British: 3
- Mixed Race: 5
- Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern British: 7
- Other Ethnic Group: 2
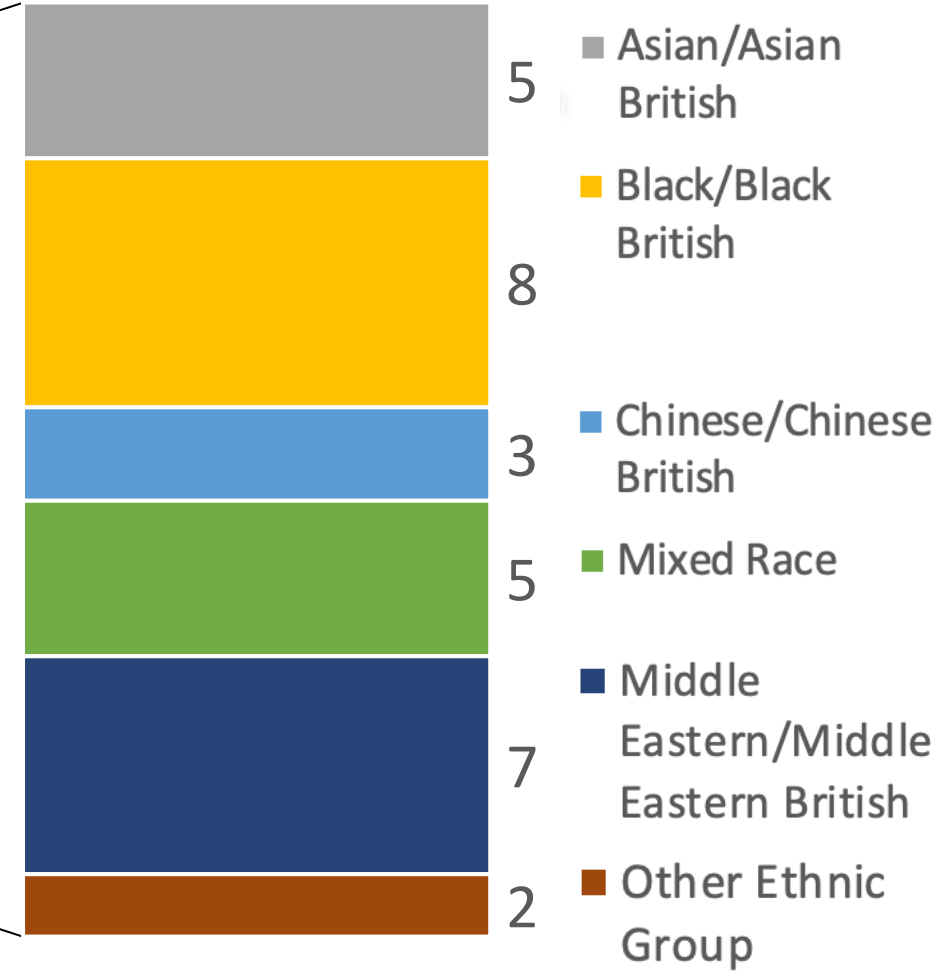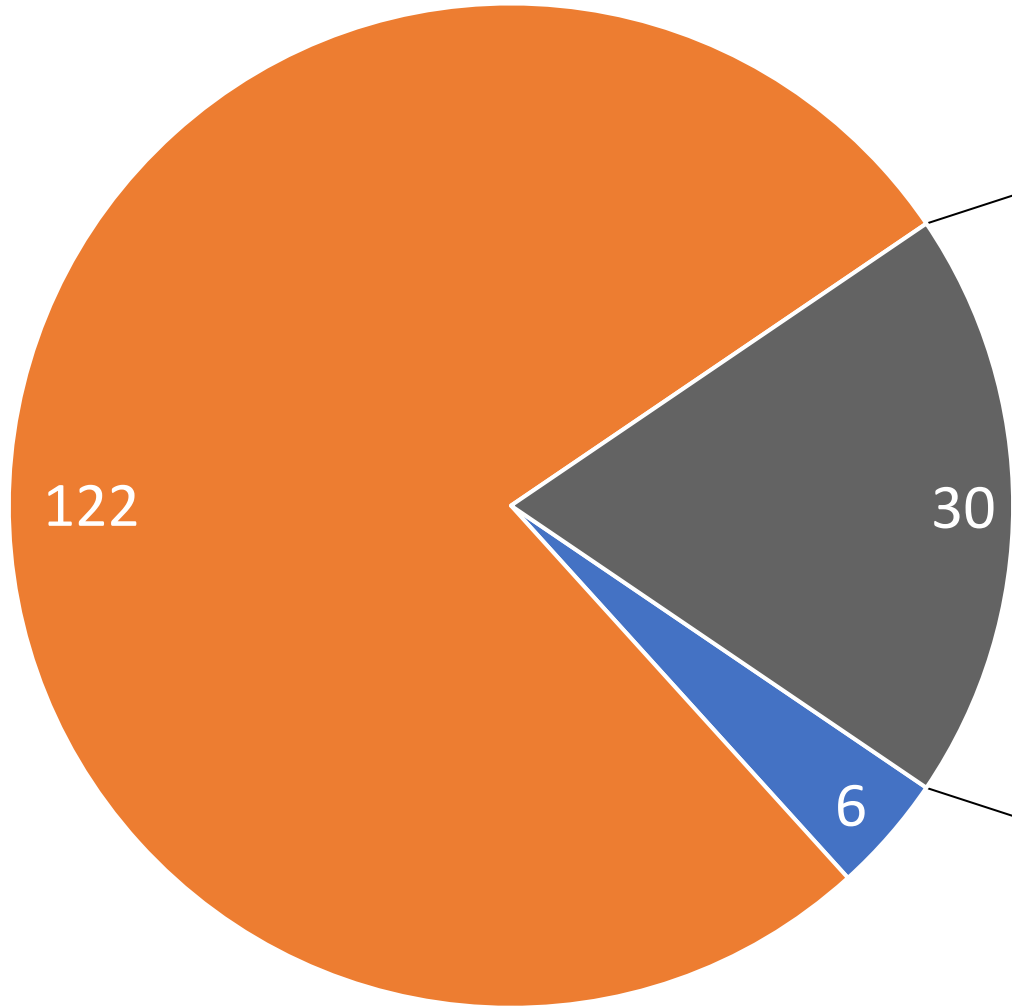
Legend:
- White/White British
- Other Ethnic Group
- Prefer not to say

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SAMPLE BY GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION
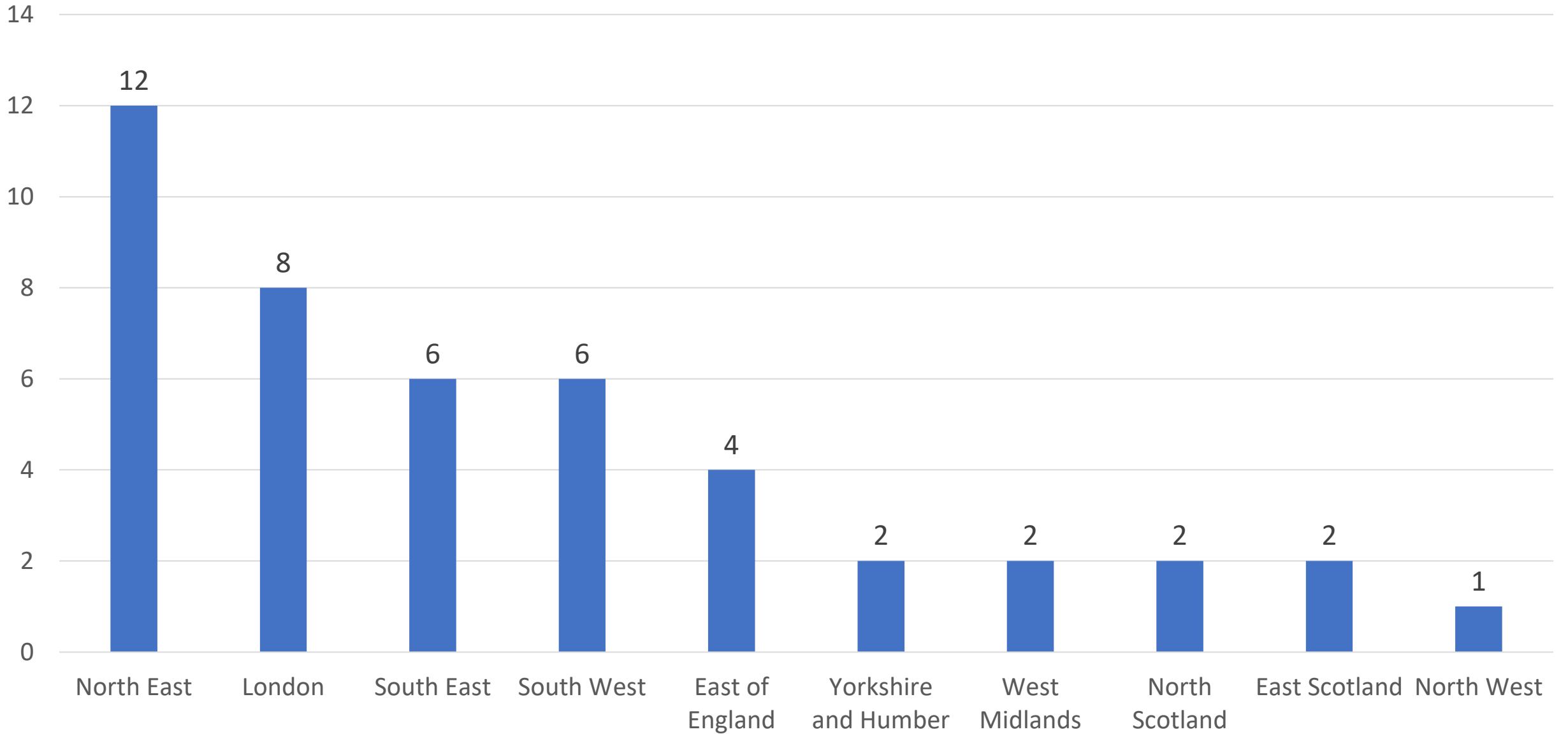
ADULT (18YRS+) SAMPLE BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Dwelling Profile

SAMPLE BY DWELLING TYPE
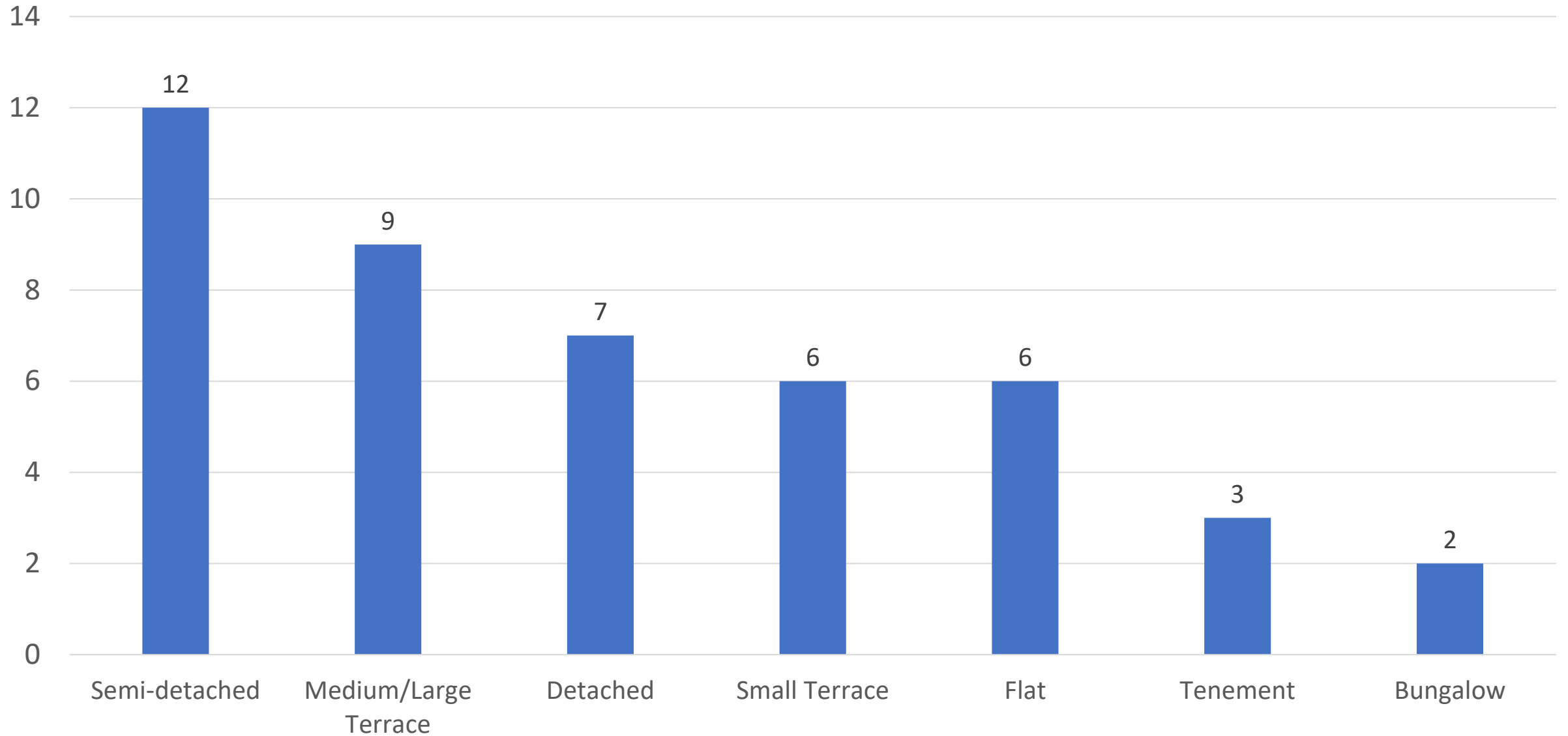
SAMPLE BY NUMBER OF BEDROOMS

SAMPLE BY OWNERSHIP/TENURE

- 0-2 bedroom
- 3 bedroom
- 4 bedroom
- 5+ bedroom

- Mortgage/Loan
- Own Outright
- Privately Renting
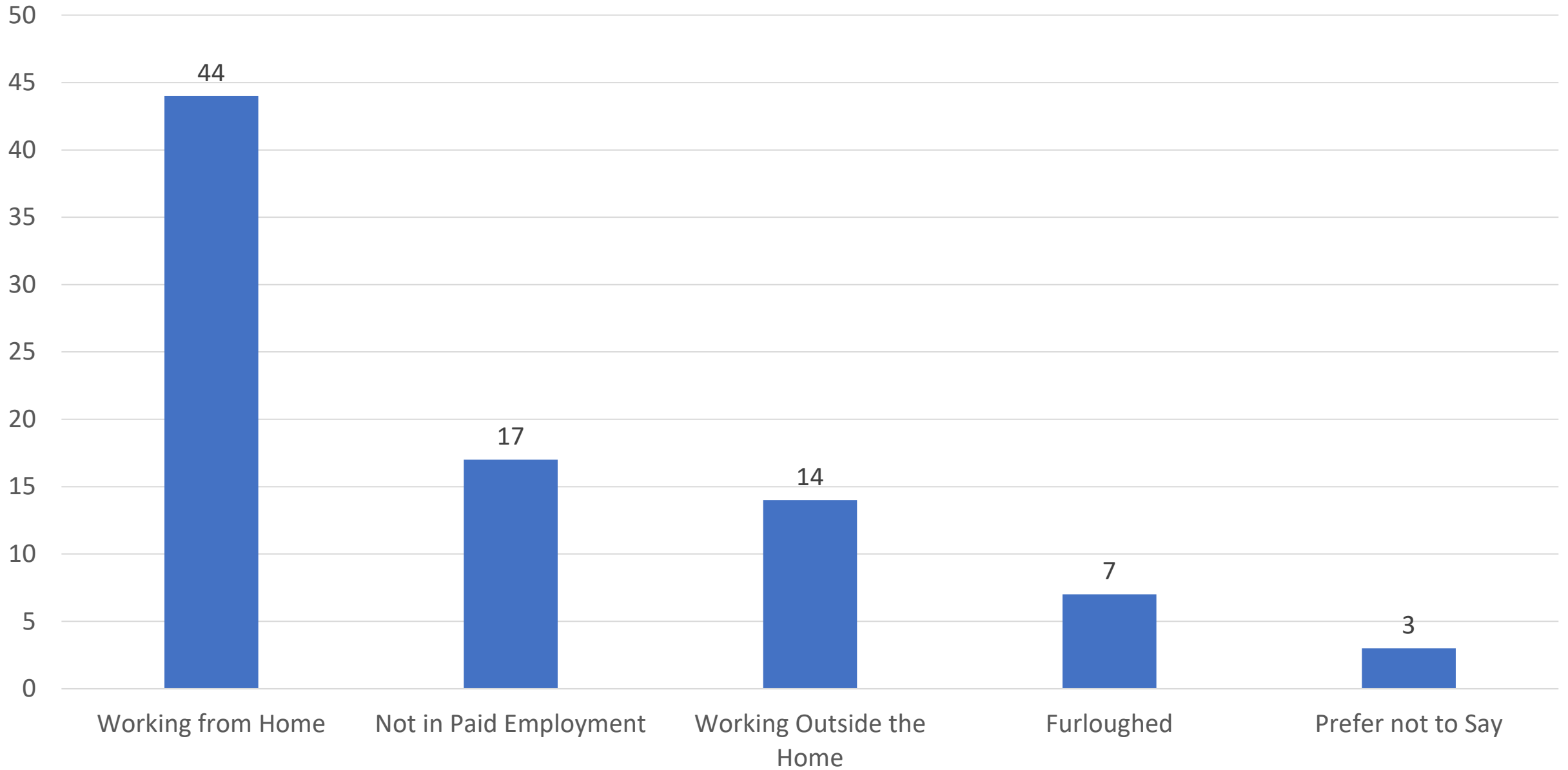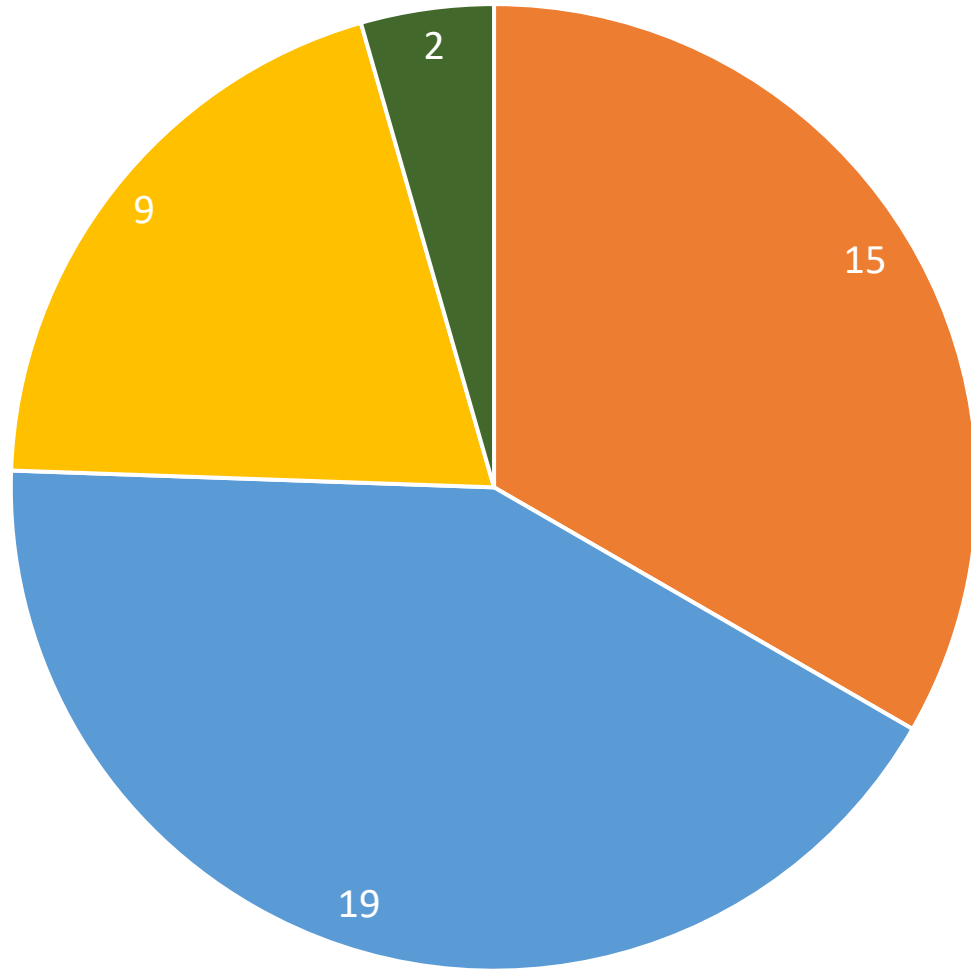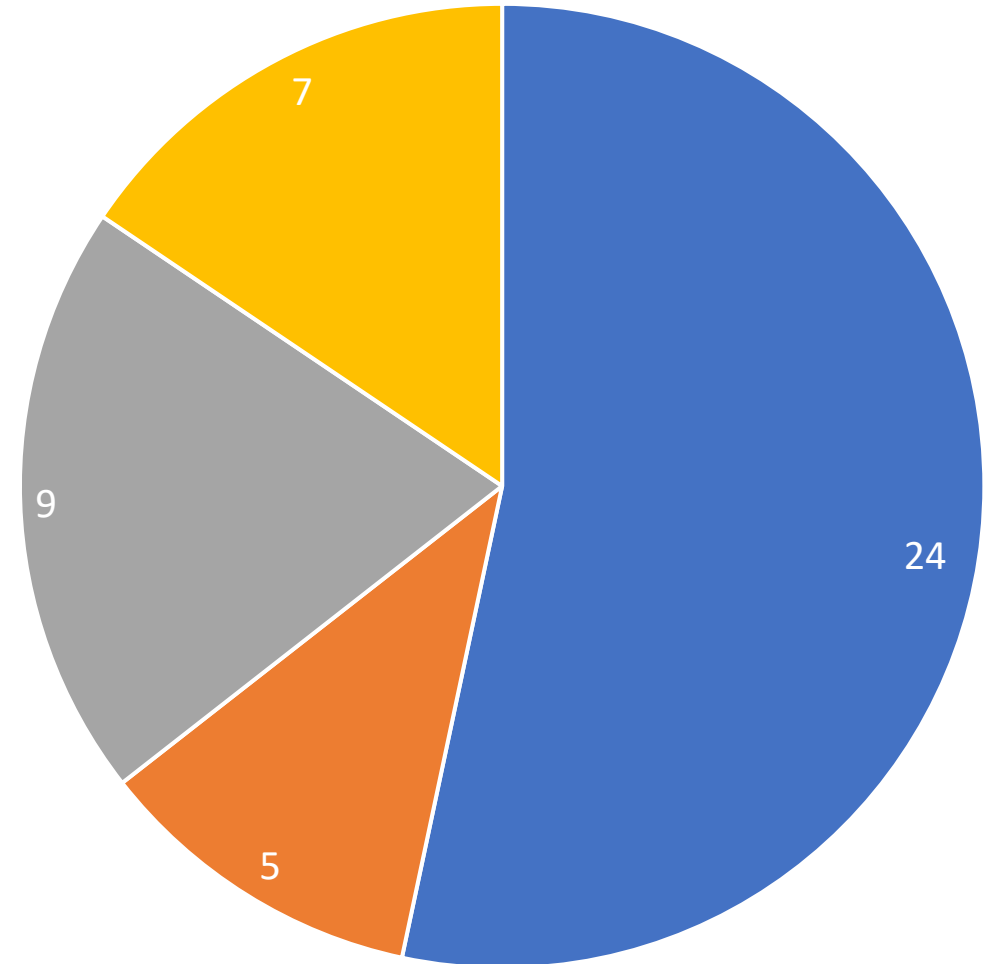- Social Housing

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Who did what where?

Overview: The Lockdown Home

Home-schooling: The majority of children home-schooling alone did so in their bedrooms or in the living room. Home-schooling with support of an adult took place primarily at the dining table. In some cases, children followed adults, e.g. home-schooling in adult work spaces.

Working from home: The majority of adults worked from their bedrooms or dining table. Others worked from a spare room or office if available.

Family time: While before lockdown family time primarily took place outside the home, during lockdown it tended to happen in the living room and the garden – these two spaces offered adequate floor space for a variety of activities (i.e. exercising, dancing, playing, crafting). Interestingly, previously adult-centred spaces such as the kitchen or the office also now accommodated family activities.

Time alone: While the majority of participants (both adults and children) discussed their bedrooms as their time alone spaces, many talked about spaces not used before, such as leftover spaces, outbuildings and areas in the garden.

Children's play/leisure: Alongside the creation of home-working and home-schooling spaces, creating opportunities for play was one of the main adaptations families talked about; many families discussed buying more toys or building outdoor play structures. The living-room and garden accommodated the majority of children's play.

Adults Leisure: The majority of adult leisure activities took place in the living room. The dining table accommodated hobbies and crafts. The garden and outbuildings were also mentioned due to their physical separation from the rest of the house.

The lockdown home was shaped by the need:

- for enough surfaces in quiet areas of the house for schooling and working,

- to withdraw from others

- for sufficient space for exercise and family activities

- for children's proximity to an adult

- to keep children occupied and support their mental health

… creating spaces for home-schooling, working from home, family time, leisure and time alone.

Family Time

Family time was defined as all activities that engaged both adults and children. During lockdown, all the families interviewed organised a variety of activities indoors and outdoors to keep the children occupied leading to an increased use of the main living spaces, compared to pre-lockdown use. Space, size and storage were reasons why the **living room** was a good place for family time, and it was mentioned as the main space for family exercise.

Gardens were popular for activities that supported wellbeing and allowed space for family physical activity. Often families discussed how the garden offered space for multiple activities to happen at the same time.

The **children's bedroom** facilitated family time and group play activities, such as pretend play. Family time in the child's bedroom was facilitated by the child's refusal to be alone.

The **kitchen/dining** table allowed families the surface area needed for a variety of activities and play – from puzzles to messy play. Cooking and baking together in the kitchen were also popular family activities.

Child's Bedroom   Adult's Bedroom   Office/ Spare Room   Outdoor Space
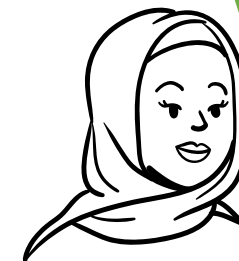
Bathroom   Living Room   Kitchen/ Dining   Playroom

"The dining area downstairs turned into the multipurpose bit of the house so that we could then designate the other places, to almost keep them pure for the important tasks … work and relaxation because we were mixing them (work and relaxation) around and that really wasn't helping anyone."

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Child Leisure

Child leisure was defined as all activities that engaged children outside of formal home schooling. Parents of younger children created play opportunities both indoors and out to support children's well-being during lockdown, while older children made their own entertainment. For younger children these activities took place primarily in the living room and the garden while older children preferred their own bedrooms. However, the TV in the living-room continued to attract children of all ages. A larger floorspace and soft flooring in the living room supported children's play.

Children generally found the **living room** to be a warm, comfortable space, and valued the potential closeness to adults, and access to technology such as the TV. Containing children's play in a separate room like the **child's bedroom** or **playroom** helped adults to control the perceived mess associated with play. Many children mentioned preferring their bedrooms for play, as that was where most of their toys and technology equipment was kept.

Almost all cases with a **garden** mentioned this as the space for active play and activities when the weather permitted. Families with larger gardens were aware of the privilege this allowed, but most families were thankful for any outdoor space, regardless of the size.

Child's Bedroom
Adult's Bedroom
Office/ Spare Room
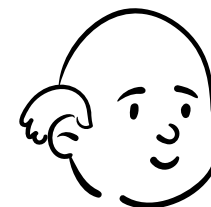Outdoor Space
Bathroom
Living Room
Kitchen/ Dining
Playroom

'...he's always been a fan of the living room. Yes, that's where the TV is and where he has his snacks and everything. He's always quite happy there.'

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Alone Time

The importance of finding space to spend time alone was emphasised by our participants, as withdrawing was often used as a way to prevent or diffuse conflict. Both adults and children sought out cosy, quiet spaces, with most restoration time taking place in the privacy of their **bedrooms**. The physical separation of the bedroom from the rest of the house, as well as its character as a 'personal' space that one could control, facilitated privacy and quiet. It is important to highlight that parents of younger children and toddlers in need of constant supervision were unable to have time alone, as were these younger children.

The **bathroom** was often mentioned as a private, alone space for adults. In the common areas of the house, such as the **living room**, adults and children used a timesharing approach to gain space to themselves. Many adults shared that the family home took on a different character in the evening, after children had gone to bed. In the absence of the children, and play, the common areas of the house to became spaces for restoration and time alone.

Child's Bedroom · Adult's Bedroom · Office/ Spare Room · Outdoor Space

Bathroom · Living Room · Kitchen/ Dining · Playroom

'I would have a bath and then maybe read a book or do something but just have an hour.'

The **garden** was discussed by both adults and children as an alone time space. Outbuildings, such as sheds or garden rooms also offered adults a space for personal time, away from children.
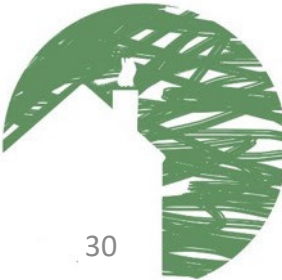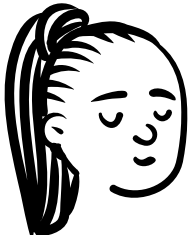
Adult Leisure

During lockdown, adults prioritised their children's needs and activities over their own relaxation and restoration. With play occupying the family home, it became difficult to find space for adults' leisure activities. Adult leisure often therefore took place after children had gone to bed and centred on the **living room.**

Although a few people did use the **adult bedroom** for leisure, for the majority this was not the preferred space due to the need to be around children; especially in the case of families with younger children. As the adult bedroom was often also a space for home working, it became difficult to 'distance' from work during leisure activities here.

The **garden** was the second most mentioned space for adult's leisure. The size of the garden was relevant here, with bigger gardens allowing exercise or sports as well as space for relaxation while the children played.

Adults used **kitchen/dining** tables for their hobbies such as crafts or puzzles. In a few cases there was mention of the difficulty in pursuing leisure activities at the dining table with working from home and home-schooling tending to occupy the surface.

Child's Bedroom

Adult's Bedroom

Office/ Spare Room

Outdoor Space

Bathroom

Living Room

Kitchen/ Dining

Playroom

"I used to finish work and put some scruffy clothes on and go up the shed. I mean I like to do gardening anyway, so I would like to be outside. I don't like being indoors. And in lockdown it was nice because I could say 'OK, I can just take my break and go up there and I used to make things and do a little bit of painting up there, or a bit of woodwork and things like that. And shut the door. And have a cup of coffee. Sometimes just sit there and think, 'Oh'. Yeah... no, it's a good relaxing space. It's nice up there, nice and peaceful."
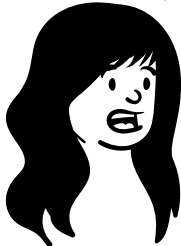
Home Working

The most common place for adult work from home was the adult bedroom, followed by the dining table or a home office. Adults were particularly positive about spaces like the **home office** that were already set up for work, as they provided separated, bounded, private space. In many cases, while one adult was using the office space, another worked from the dining table. In a few cases with younger children, adults had to timeshare work and the office space with their partners, in order to take turns doing childcare. Having the appropriate technology made working from home easier, but sharing workspace with other adults impacted on productivity and privacy.

In the absence of any spare room or office/study, the **adult's bedroom** offered privacy and quiet, yet this created situations where adults felt they could not escape from work.

Working in the **living room** or **kitchen/dining** spaces allowed parents to also support children in their home schooling.

A small number of adults mentioned working in the **garden**. This was usually in outbuildings specifically designed as a separate, bounded work space that provided privacy and allowed separation from work and family life.

Child's Bedroom

Adult's Bedroom

Office/ Spare Room

Outdoor Space

Bathroom

Living Room

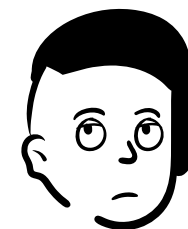Kitchen/ Dining

Playroom

"… that's my work office, but it's in my living room 'cause I don't have any other space in my bedroom to do this So that's where I'm working from home doing. Also my personal stuff on there on my computer and it. It's also my radio is on in the background when I'm working."

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Home Schooling

Children's home-schooling was divided into two major categories: children working alone and children working with, or in the presence of, an adult. Those working on their own primarily used their **bedrooms**, while children of all ages in need of assistance by an adult tended to work in the **living room** or **kitchen/dining** space. Older children working alone in their **bedrooms** seemed to enjoy the separation from their parents, allowing them to focus on their studies, and gain personal space.

Children who did schoolwork independently in the common areas of the home, tended to prefer the living room, while home-schooling with adult support took place at the dining table. Younger children often worked in child sized tables that they moved around the house home-schooling wherever the adults were in order to get the support they needed. Some adults also visited children in their bedrooms to support them when needed, sometimes taking their own work into the child's bedroom for short periods.

The **back garden** (not the outbuildings), also accommodated children's independent home-schooling. Home-schooling in the garden took non-traditional approaches such as sitting on the trampoline or swing while attending online classes.

Child's Bedroom

Adult's Bedroom

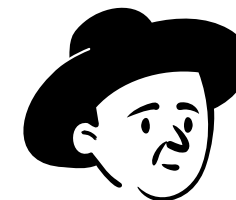Office/ Spare Room

Outdoor Space

Bathroom

Living Room

Kitchen/ Dining

Playroom

"…quite often what would happen is [mother] would take [child] into the kitchen with her while I was teaching a lesson, and then when [mother] was in a meeting [child] would come back into the lounge with me if I wasn't teaching"

Important Places, Difficult Places

Adults

Important places

The most commonly mentioned important space for adults was the **living room**. This was mainly because it supported family time and leisure which were both highly valued.

The **dining table** was mentioned by many parents being important as a working space.

Also particularly important were places that offered individual privacy, such as the **adult bedroom,** the **office** the **loft** or **garden/outbuildings**.

> *"Well, that was the biggest place (the kitchen table) to do it."*

Living room
Dining table
Garden
Adult bedroom

> *"I think I'd say the living room area 'cause it's got the TV so I can just sit down, relax and watch TV. Um, I think the second most will be my bedroom because I usually go and sometimes when I need a bit of quiet time I go to my room. I go on the phone, I just lay in the bed."*

Living room
Dining table
Adult bedroom

> *"'Because it is the place where I sleep, the place where I do yoga and where I like to relax before I go to sleep but now it has also become a place where I do a very stressful job and have lots of difficult conversations. But this was the only option."*

> *"It would probably have to be the living room, because t's a place to relax and having lots of toys and stuff stacked around doesn't kind of promote such a relaxing sort of atmosphere."*

Difficult places

Adults found multi-use (and open-plan) spaces particularly difficult due to interruptions and distractions. The **living room** was often mentioned as a difficult space, as it often accommodated conflicting uses and was not designated for work, despite being used for this purpose. Working at the **dining table** interrupted everyday family life and created difficulties for the adults working there. The **adult bedroom** was a difficult space when it accommodated work, blurring the boundaries between work and leisure.

Children

Favourite places

Children's favourite space, across all ages and house typologies, was the **living-room.** Especially for younger children, the communality it offered, the TV and the comfortable furnishing were the primary reasons stated. The second favourite space for children of all ages was the **child's bedroom** – storing toys and supporting activities. Its privacy was stressed by older children. **The back garden** was among older children's favourite spaces. **Outbuildings** were also mentioned by children of all ages. Older children discussed the privacy of the **bathroom** . Surprisingly, a couple of children mentioned the **adult's bedroom**.

Living room
Child's bedroom
Garden
Outbuildings

''What I would say about my bedroom is that I have loads of toys that I just play with and do my crafts. Yeah, there's a nice peaceful place. I didn't have anything to worry about or I can just play my games and have fun.''

Child: "The living room"
R: "Why the living room?"
Child: "Because I like working with daddy."

Places they didn't like

The majority of children answering this question were older children (older than 6). Children younger than 6 years old either didn't have a least favourite space or their parents answered for them, often discussing spaces dangerous for them such as the kitchen.

''I think just in general the kitchen downstairs area because it was just a shared space.''

''It was probably the lounge and the laundry room, because they're really kind of like… the laundry was… quite a lot of people went in there to feed the cats and get on with the washing and microwaves and stuff, but was really annoying.''

Utility rooms
Circulation spaces
Shared bedroom
Sibling's bedroom
Dining table

Children disliked busy spaces and areas with constant circulation. Other factors such as the temperature and acoustics of a room were discussed.

Younger children didn't like their **sibling's bedroom**, especially when they were not allowed in, or their **own bedroom** unless they had company

Challenges to Liveability

Challenges

Challenges

"Having spent all day together and then having to go to bed. Always the standard 'she poked me', 'he hit me', 'she stole my teddy bear' 'she's breathed heavily in my direction', 'my sock's gone'. It was definitely worse."

"I had [13yr old] going on in her call and so when she was doing PE she was jumping about and everything. So, I couldn't really hear what they were saying ... and then [6yr old] was playing with dollies in her room."

"I had to be near enough to them that if anything did happen I could just like break my call and go out... despite the rule being if the door is shut don't come in unless it is a dire emergency, I'd still have people coming in and out and telling me things"

"We have bunk beds because we're living in my grandparents' house and then we also have really close proximity, so also stuck together."

Home space and wellbeing
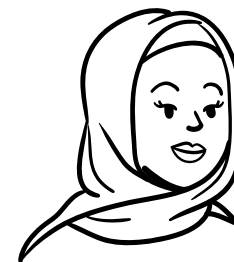
How did homes support family well-being?

The most commonly discussed factor in relation to family wellbeing during lockdown was outdoor space. The majority of people with a **private back garden** highlighted the importance of this space for activities and relaxation. The **front garden** allowed families some interaction with their neighbours and passers-by.

The second most important factor supporting families' well-being was argued to be **spaciousness**. Families highlighted not only **adequate space,** but also having **enough rooms** to designate for working from home and home-schooling, or for containing mess. Having enough rooms was a factor seen to directly affect alone time; many participants noted that their well-being was supported as a result of having space to withdraw to.

"But we definitely lived outside. I think to get some relief from being in a very small open plan house."

**Garden
Connections to outside
Spaciousness
Enough rooms
Adequate storage**

"There are three of us and we've got a four bedroom house. So we did have space and we could get away from each other and that could help. And I didn't have to work at the kitchen table, I had a room to do that and [child] had a room that he could get away from us in the sitting room or in his bedroom. Yeah, so I can't imagine what it would be like trying to live in a really small space."

How did homes hinder family well-being?

Families **without access to a private garden** argued that this was the main factor affecting their well-being during lockdown. Lack of connection to the outside created tensions in the home.

Homes with **not enough rooms** to separate activities and provide space for withdrawal also affected participants' well-being. **Children sharing a bedroom** was argued to create tensions. The **living room,** accommodating a variety of often conflicting activities, also created tension and conflict. Families living in **bungalows** were unhappy with the layout of their home, commenting on the lack of physical separation between the different areas of the house. Similarly, families living in houses with **open plan** areas commented on their homes not supporting separation.

Many participants connected their well-being with the quality of their **workspace**, saying if they could have designated their workspace and separated themselves from the rest of the family, they would have felt more supported by their homes.
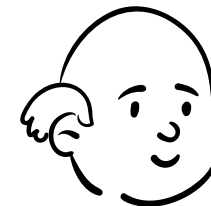
**No garden
Not enough rooms
Layout of the house
Non-designated spaces
Multi-use spaces**

"The challenges, as I said, the lack of space. That's the main challenge. I mean with three kids, and since we only have two bedrooms we had to sleep in the living room and you know, it's not easy."

"If I had, or if we had another room. Not big [...] where I could have set up an office, that would have, I think, helped. Certainly myself mentally a lot more, for the separation of work life essentially."

"I think it was probably a combination of stress and anxiety and limited exercise and just everything being a bit muddled, but I think that if we had an outside space then we could just walk. I think fresh air is really important for that. [...]It's difficult if you're confined at home and you don't have a garden. You can open the windows, but it's not the same."

"Our home is a bungalow,, and that didn't help with everybody feeling on top of each other [...]'cause you know we had no upstairs to go to retreat to... so we all felt very like we were on top of each other the whole time."

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Adaptations

Adaptations

- **Built internal walls**
  - *i.e. Dividing an existing room into two smaller spaces*
- **Built or installed an outdoor structure**
  - *e.g. Building a pergola in the garden for shade*
- **Changed the use of an existing space**
  - *e.g. Transforming a spare room to an office*
- **Decorated**
  - *e.g. Painting a room*
- **Multi-used spaces either synchronously or by timesharing them**
  - *e.g. Working in the kitchen or relaxing in the living room after the child had gone to bed*
- **Gardening/Landscaping**
  - *e.g. Levelling the ground*
- **Extended an existing building**
  - *e.g. Built a conservatory*
- **Built outbuildings**
  - *e.g. A watertight shed or garden room*
- **Rearranged or added new furniture/equipment**
  - *e.g. Adding a printer to an office*
- **Removed internal walls**
  - *e.g. Connect two rooms to make a bigger space*
- **Made temporary changes to pretend we were somewhere else**
  - *e.g. Camping in the living room*

"…It was built specifically for [partner]. When we met she used to go on and on and on about wanting a koi pond. And the front garden, when we moved in, was just basically just grass…"

"… I took all the work equipment away, we just unloaded the shelves, unloaded the cupboards and put it all back out again to make it look a more comfortable and relaxing place to work really."

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Changing use of existing space

"The playhouse ... before it was a mess space like loads of toys thrown around in it and now it's more of a space where we just sit and it's just nice to sit and like do the crafts with them"

Temporary change to pretend to be somewhere else

"I did it initially to try to distract them from what was going on... to say right guys, this is going to be so exciting we're going to eat our dinner at the Conservatory and we're going to pretend it's a restaurant"

Re-arranged/added furniture or furnishings

"I've used a couple of blankets, nailed them to the wall and there's quite a quite a big space there. It was quite like an extra room. You know, even though you were in the same room - you could hear everyone - it felt like a bit of a privacy."

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Adaptations for Wellbeing

# Which spaces were adapted to support well-being?

**Garden
Living room
Play-rooms
Outbuildings**

"We had a big declutter, gave her a toy room in the fourth bedroom, got rid of all her toys downstairs and put them up in there. So, it was… It made a big difference actually."

"Just doing activities and things[…] like outside or in the kitchen. Trying to keep our spirits up."

"We've got some garden toys and things […] and we also bought a hot tub. That was one of those lockdown purchases. And that was really nice, 'cause it meant that we were using the garden as a family, as a leisure time thing. It was lovely. Because we know we're not gonna go on holiday. Let's spend some money on something like this."

"In the living room the main change was… we removed the sofa and created like a den behind."
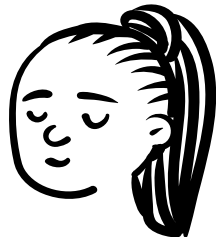
Adaptations that supported physical activity, were argued to support both adult's and children's well-being. The majority of these adaptations took place in the **garden**, however, a few were made in the living-room. Other well-being related activities, including play, were accommodated in the **living-room and kitchen**. New toys and play equipment were bought, while the furniture and furnishings were re-arranged. Improvements in the **garden** were also argued to support well-being, alleviating the feelings of isolation or offering withdrawal space. Some families described other interior adaptations made to create **spaces for withdrawal/time alone**.

Creating **designated spaces for work and home-schooling**, either in the house (converting the loft or transforming a spare room to an office) or in the form of **outbuildings**, allowed participants to separate the different members of the family and create a distinction between work and leisure space, supported by a routine. A couple of families discussed creating a **playroom** to contain toys and 'mess', away from the living-room area.

Re-decorating and changing furniture in a room was argued to lift people's moods. Other light-touch changes such as rearranging the **furniture** and buying **plants**, **candles** and **lights** were discussed.

Further Information

Email contacts

Project: athomewithchildren@newcastle.ac.uk

Principal Investigator: rosie.parnell@newcastle.ac.uk

@homewchildren

Online/In the press

website: https://athomewithchildren.ac.uk

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Research Team
Newcastle Uni: Rosie Parnell (PI), Husam Abo Kanon (RA), Emily Pattinson (RA), Alkistis Pitsikali (RA)
Univ of Dundee: Sandra Costa Santos (Co-I), Heba Sarhan (RA)