



# How Alice Charity can respond to their families in a 'post pandemic' landscape

A Get Talking research study by Alice Charity and Staffordshire University

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Produced by  
Alice Charity  
and  
Staffordshire University

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## Introduction

The Greenhouse project is funded by The National Lottery Community fund to develop a pipeline of trained family support workers, recruited from the most disadvantaged local families. Alice Charity committed to having an external evaluation of the project and commissioned Staffordshire University to do this using participatory research to involve Alice Charity staff and trainees in the process. Part of the evaluation is delivered using participatory research with Alice Charity staff and trainees, which is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

This report will look at the research undertaken by Alice Charity staff and trainees as part of their Get Talking training in 2022, [following on from the previous report in 2021.](#)



## What is Get Talking?

Get Talking is an approach to participatory action research, that supports people to become community researchers. Participants can complete a 15-credit, level 3 certificate of credit in 'Get Talking: Creative Community Consultation' from Staffordshire University. There is no expectation that community researchers will have any academic experience or qualifications.

Get Talking community researchers are usually members of the public or people from a certain community with an interest in the research area. Community researchers are co-owners and co-producers of the research and are involved throughout the research process from planning, involving stakeholders, listening and learning, cross-checking and action. Although projects will differ, in Get Talking projects, community researchers usually:

- Help to decide the focus of the research and write the research questions.
- Identify the people to be approached as participants in the research.
- Design the creative consultation techniques to be used to collect data.
- Reach out to their networks to engage them in the research.
- Interview or facilitate focus groups with participants.
- Contribute to the research findings by sharing their own stories and experiences.
- Analyse findings with the team.
- Disseminate findings with the team by contributing to reports or sharing findings at an event.

## How we did our research

The main question for the Alice Charity community research team was “How Alice Charity can respond to their families in a ‘post-pandemic’ landscape?”. In this case, it was important to the charity to understand what local families need from them- given the movement from a lockdown world into one which is ‘free’ from restrictions, and how as a charity they can continue to best support people given the complex situations experienced by families in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire.

The research was conducted by eight members of staff from Alice Charity, who completed the Get Talking short course with Staffordshire University. As community researchers, the eight staff members conducted different community consultations, interviews, and conversations with some of the families that they support. Through these consultations, it was possible to gain more insight into the needs of families, the impact of Alice Charity services, as well as the awareness and potential changes needed from Alice Charity services to meet the diverse needs of the community that the charity serves.

The conversations took place in April 2022, over a week. The community research group split into two groups of four, to tackle the question in different ways.

Each team used a creative tool to help facilitate a conversation with the families and community members that they spoke to. With a creative tool, it allows consultations to be delivered in a creative way to maximise accessibility and engagement with the research, breaking down barriers and levelling out power differences.

The first group, The Post-Covid Team, looked at the question by speaking directly with families that they support in the Stoke-on-

Trent and Newcastle-Under-Lyme areas. Here, the questions revolved around what families have struggled with the most during COVID as well as how they have found readapting to a 'post-covid' climate. Additionally, the services that they have accessed were explored, looking at the impact of these and how things could be changed, to meet the developing needs of the community. To facilitate conversation, the group used a 'House of Change' creative tool, where families could add their responses to questions to a house which broke down each question and allowed families to share the information that they wanted to, in their voice.

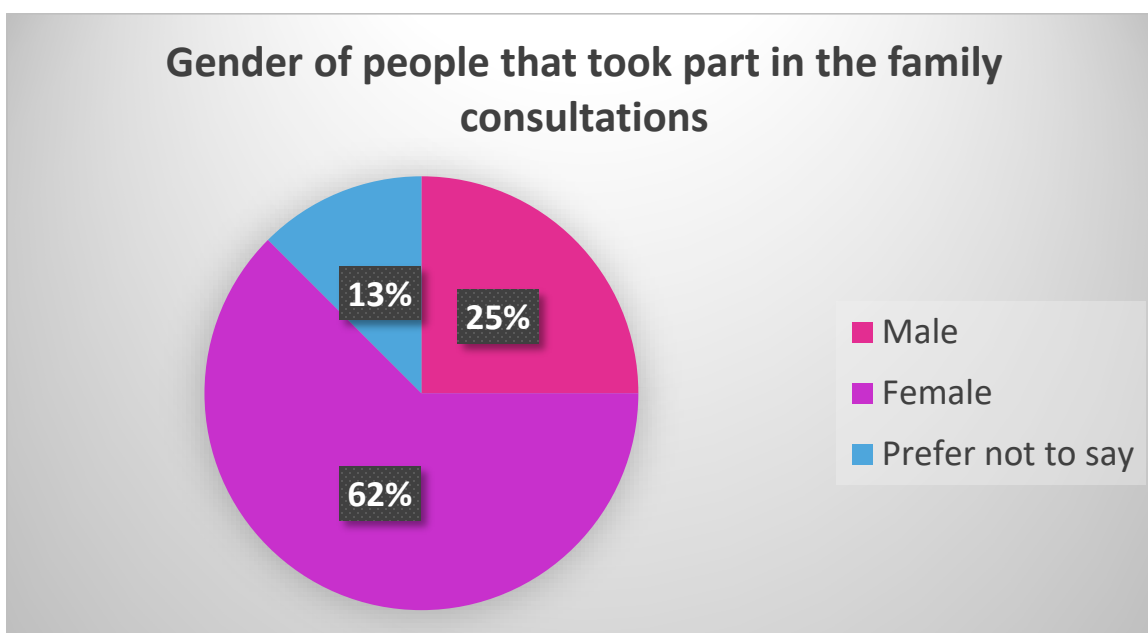
The second group, The Service Awareness Team, spoke with 21 people that attend the baby and toddler group, Big Cup, and Alice Charity's People's Pantry service. The group used different methods to collect people's thoughts and experiences. Like the other group, the service awareness team used a creative tool that collected both qualitative and quantitative information regarding awareness of services as well as collecting opinions on 'What more can Alice Charity do?'. At the Peoples Pantry, the creative tool was designed to look like a piece of fruit and once completed would be added to a shopping cart when it had been completed. When used at Big Cup the creative tool was designed to look like a heart and once filled in, was added to a teapot when it had been completed.

The creative tool used in these settings allowed those that responded to remain anonymous to the data that they had submitted. The group explored the awareness of Alice Charity services that were known to those that access Big Cup and People's Pantry.

## Experiences of families

Four members of the post-covid team, split into two teams of two, spoke with eight families that Alice Charity supports in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme. These semi-structured interviews aligned with arranged family support activities, making sure that families were in a comfortable environment to take part in the conversations, and making use of the 'house of change' creative tool designed by the research team.

Of the people spoken to, 62% were female and 25% were male. 63% were in the age group 35-49 and 12% 18-34 (Appendix 6). 75% said that they were White English and 12% said that they were White Scottish (Appendix 5). Regarding employment, Unable to work and Unemployed made up 25% each, 13% said that they were part-time self-employed, and 12% said that they were part-time employed (Appendix 4). For all other demographic information relating to this side of the research, please see the appendices (Appendix 2- Postcode, Appendix 3- Disability).





## Isolation and access to services

Throughout the research process, it was possible to see how families had been impacted by COVID-19. Like the [previous community research conducted by Alice Charity](#), isolation has had an impact on people's lives, leaving lasting effects on families. This research found that the families which they spoke to, struggled most with feeling isolated from family, friends, and support services during initial lockdowns in 2020-2021. The knock-on of this was that it had a negative impact on some of the family's mental health:

*“I've struggled with not seeing relatives and partner, the social isolation”*

*“[I've struggled with] Social isolation, especially with the children and the lack of routine”*

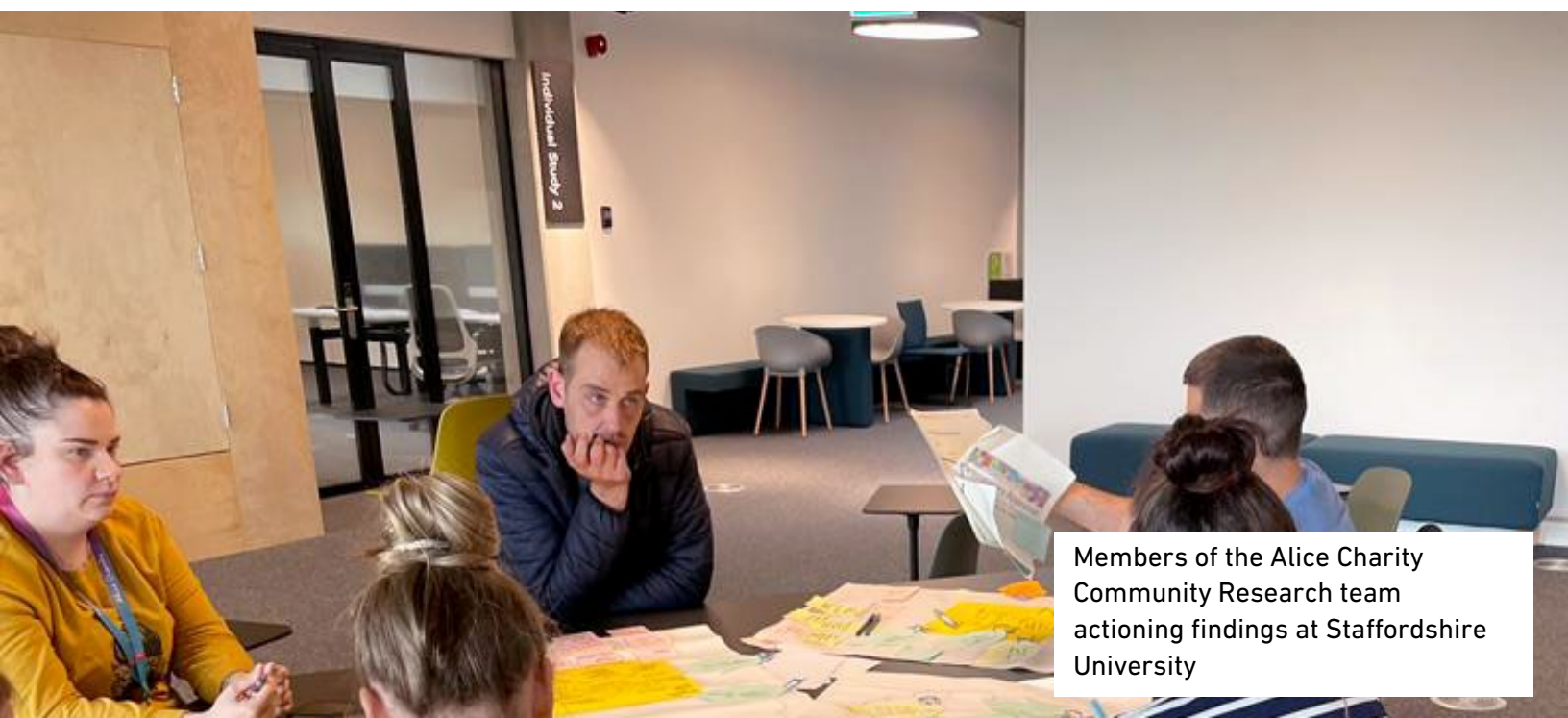
With some community support services being shut, or running in a reduced capacity, during times of lockdown it made life difficult for families that needed to access more services than just Alice Charity:

*“Trying to sort day-to-day things is difficult when everywhere is closed”*

*“[I've accessed] Alice [Charity] for social care. Everything else seemed to stop”*

As shown in the 2021 report, demand for Alice Charity services went up exponentially during 2020 and 2021 due to remaining active in times of lockdown, which provided lifelines for families across Newcastle-Under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent.

The conversations here show the lasting impacts of COVID lockdowns and the feelings which people still carry with them. Although future lockdowns are unlikely, these narratives show the lasting impacts felt by families, highlighting the need for families to continue to access third-sector services even when facing government-sanctioned times of isolation.



Members of the Alice Charity Community Research team actioning findings at Staffordshire University

## A shift to virtual

Now that government restrictions have been lifted it was possible to see that families were able to return to use the services which they had used pre-pandemic in a face-to-face capacity, which has had a positive impact. This opened interesting conversations around the role that services offering remote interaction have played in the last two years. Notably that virtual methods were able to provide some level of service and connection which otherwise would have meant that people would have gone without. Additionally, virtual services offered by schools and health services proved beneficial, especially in the case of overcoming anxieties:

*“These services met the family’s needs at the time. [Mum] preferred virtual methods and these services offered this. [Mum] has severe anxiety and struggles with face-to-face appointments”*

Virtual methods were mentioned to be one of the strengths of Alice Charity’s service during the lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021. Responses from families note the need to extend the virtual service provision that Alice Charity offers, by including options such as live web chat, to offer a service for people that would otherwise be unable to access a face-to-face service.

The shift to virtual methods highlighted the disparities in digital access, this proved to be even more difficult, especially for those accessing mental health or domestic violence services:

*“[Domestic Violence services] Mental Health services, everything went virtual, and I don’t have the funds to access technology”*

Although there is a new demand for virtual services moving away from the pandemic, it's clear that if such a service was offered this would have to be on a smaller scale than the full face-to-face services that are offered by the charity.

## Cost of Living

2022 has seen the worsening situation of the cost of living across the United Kingdom, making life difficult for millions of families. The people that Alice Charity supports have also been hit hard by this, with families needing extra support with bills and food:

*“I have had help with food when needed but most importantly, I know that Alice are there if I need any help or support with anything that comes up”*

As part of the Get Talking research, families outlined that they saw Alice Charity as one of the main places to go for help and guidance surrounding the cost of living, including advice on budgeting and provision of food and essential items. Importantly the charity's ability to signpost to other services was seen to be an aspect of the charity which has helped them in their overall lives:

*“[Alice has helped me with] food, clothes, items, having someone to talk to [and] signposting [to services such as CAB]”*

## Impact of Alice Charity on families

Although times are difficult it was also possible to see the positive impact that Alice Charity is having on families that it supports in the local area, by remaining an accessible organisation that helps people to grow. Through Alice Charity's services, they're able to provide people, from across the community, with access to essential food and items, as well as tailored and meaningful emotional support:

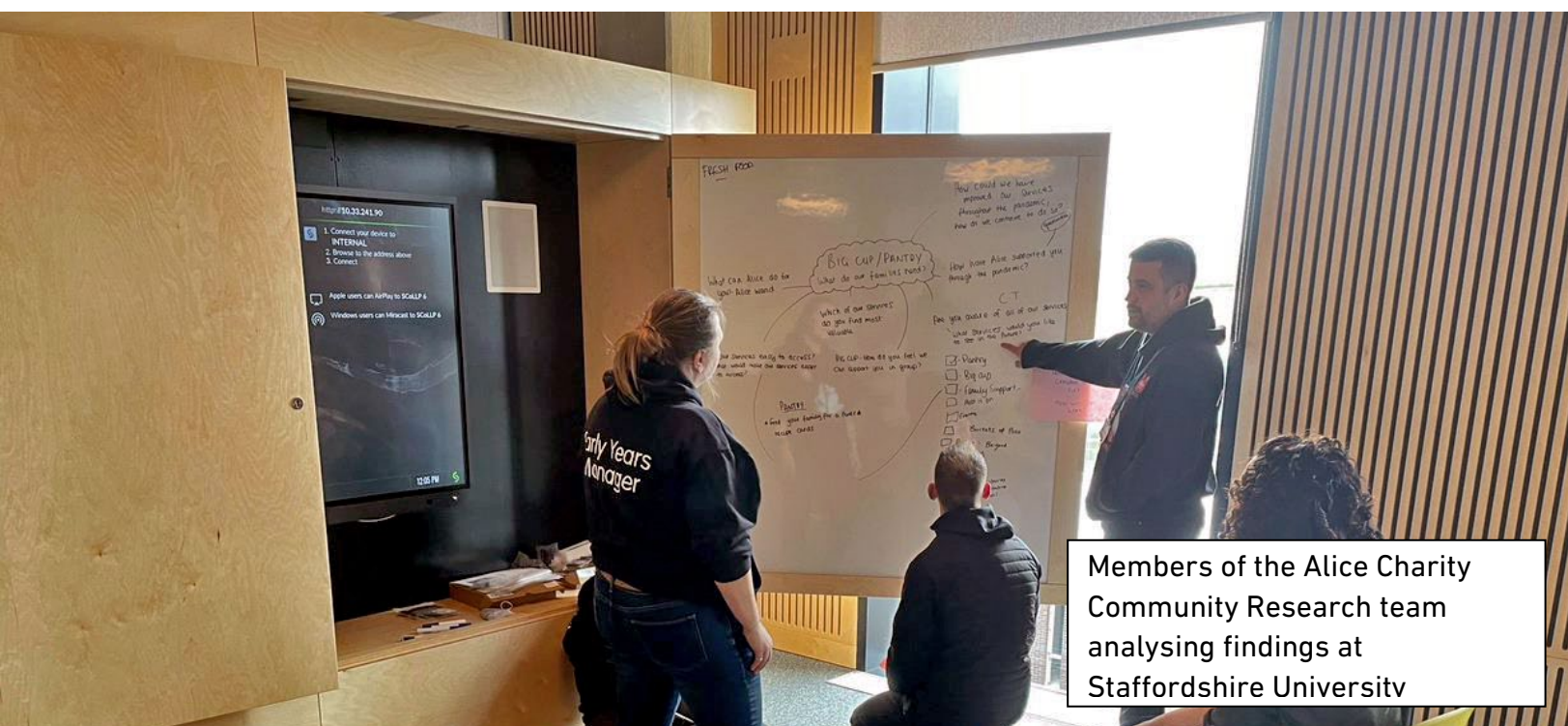
*“Alice has helped with essential food and emotional support, I don't know how to thank Alice enough for all of their help, they were there when no other service was”*

Families, that Alice Charity support, spoke about the reassurance that they receive from the charity's services, highlighting the ease of access and non-judgemental environments that are created to allow people to feel at ease:

*“Alice is very accessible and not a judgmental service, each person is treated individually and with respect. Everyone is listened to”*

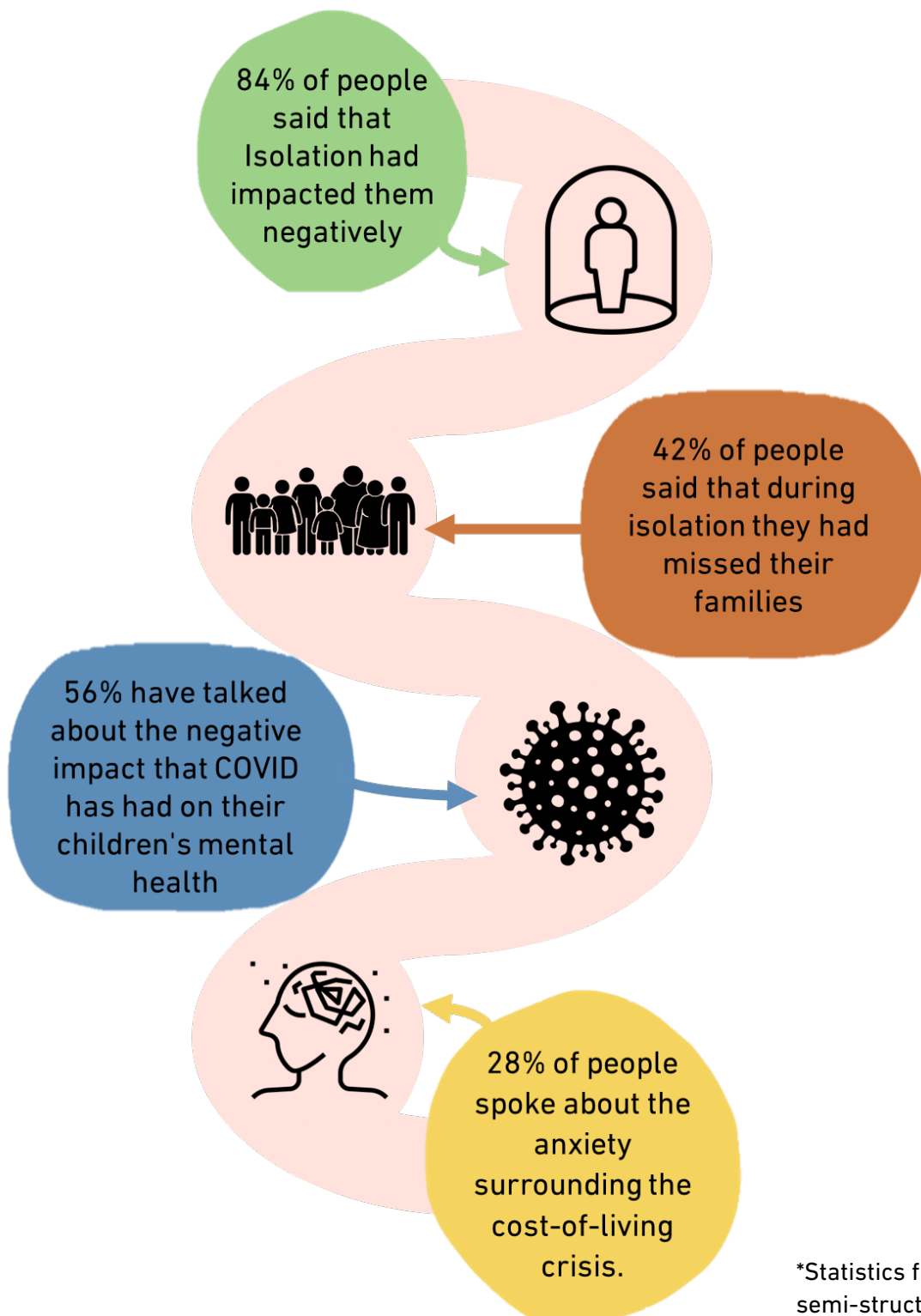
The significance of individuality, that Alice Charity champions, allows people to gain confidence and self-belief, ultimately taking steps towards becoming more independent. Being respected as an individual, in a safe, non-judgmental space, is important to helping families to thrive and grow. The result of services embedded with these principles means that families not only grow in confidence but they're able to strive for something which they may have before thought was unachievable:

*“Alice has helped me improve my home. I feel I can now reach my potential as a mum”*



Members of the Alice Charity Community Research team analysing findings at Staffordshire University

## Summary of conversations had with families

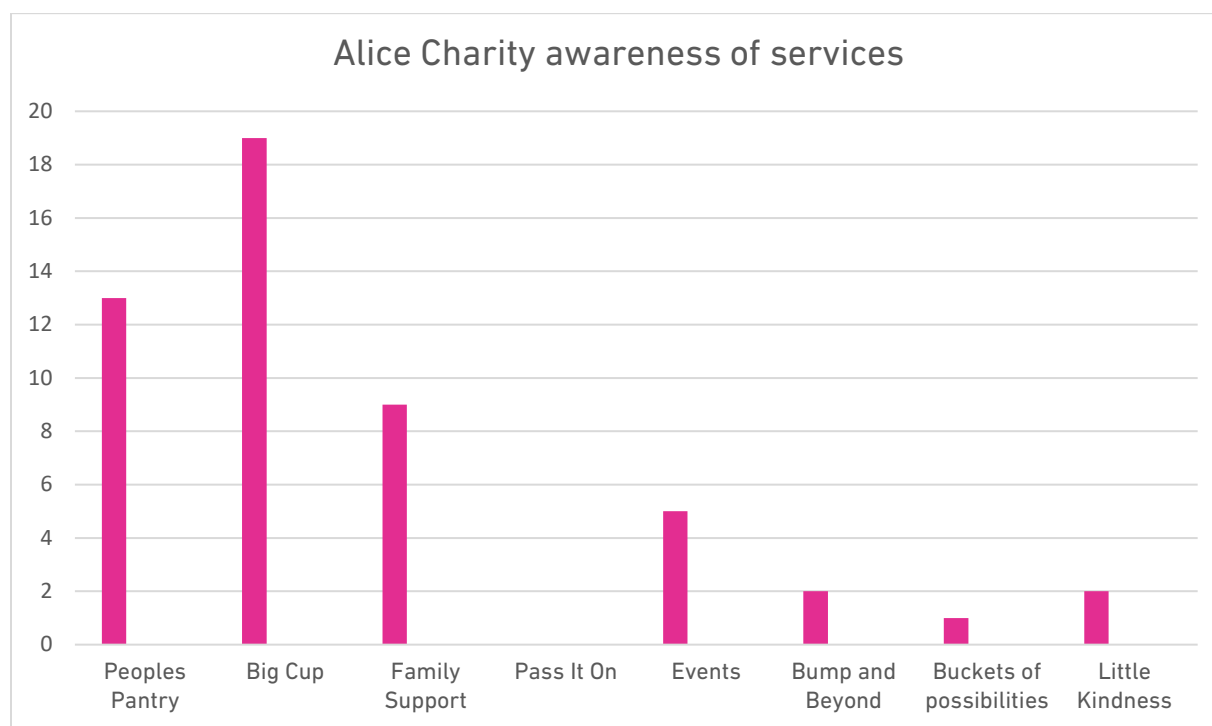


\*Statistics from the analysis of eight semi-structured interviews with Alice Charity families

## Awareness of services

As shown above, families that Alice Charity supports in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme were still able to access the charity's services during lockdowns. Alice Charity community researchers wanted to understand how aware families were of wider Alice Charity services now that services have returned to full face-to-face operations for the community, following on from the COVID-19 lockdown measures implemented in 2020 and 2021.

Using a creative tool, families were asked about their awareness of Alice Charity services. Participants were asked to indicate on the creative tool which ones they were aware of and submit this anonymously on a visit to the Peoples Pantry or during a Big Cup session.

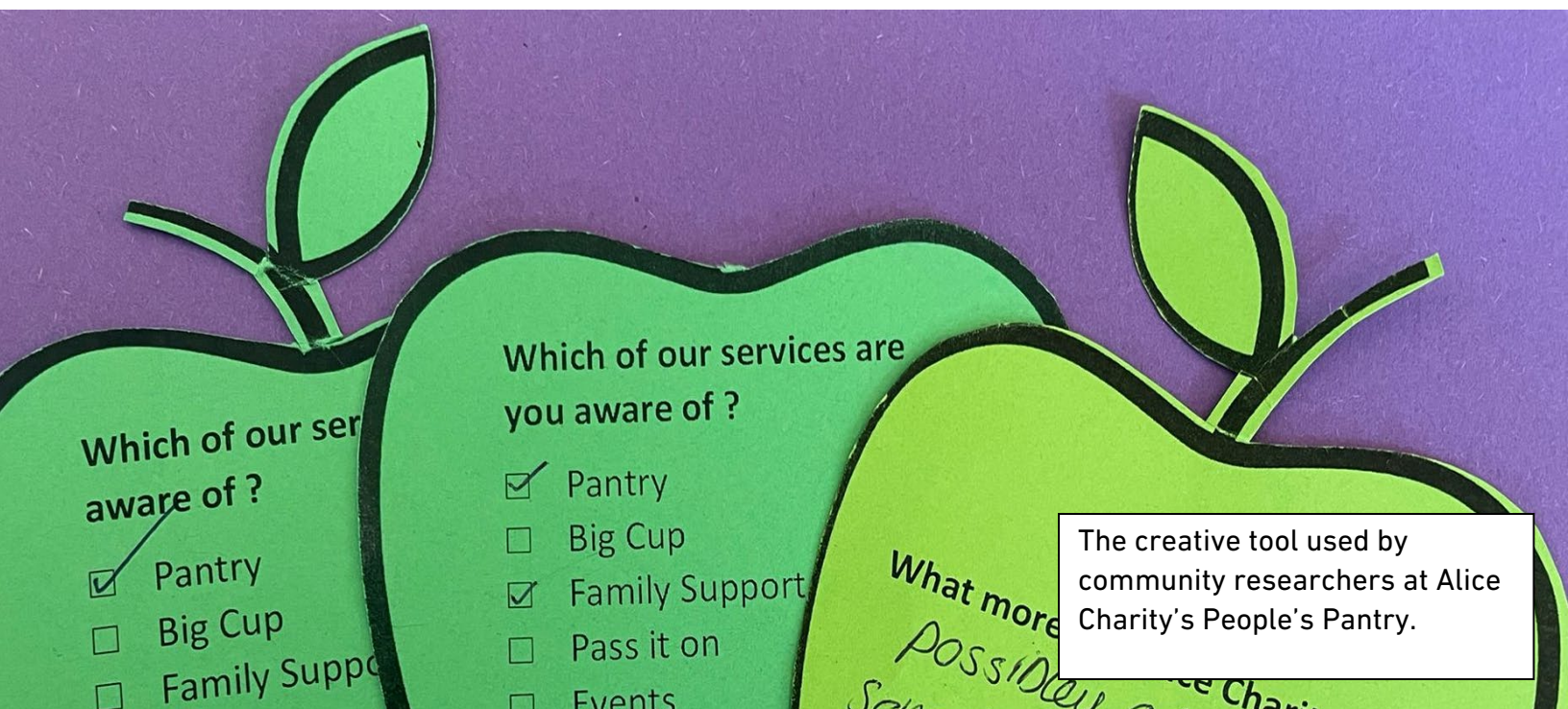




The Peoples Pantry and Big Cup were the most well-known services. However, these were the places where the creative consultation tool was used, therefore would show that if people are there then they are likely to know about the service. Away from these two services, the next most known service is Family Support (9) and Events (5). Following these, the awareness of other services is relatively low, with the Pass It On service not having any public awareness of the service coming from the people that had engaged with the research.

The sample size for this consultation is relatively small and was conducted across two weeks of a school holiday, therefore it reflects a small insight into the community awareness of Alice Charity services.

Regarding the awareness of services known to those that access Alice Charity's Big Cup and People's Pantry, the overwhelming theme coming out of the research was about a need for an increase in local awareness of different Alice Charity services. From the community research, it was suggested that an increase in advertising would prove beneficial to members of the public who otherwise wouldn't know about Alice Charity.



The creative tool used by community researchers at Alice Charity's People's Pantry.

In addition to the already well-followed Alice Charity social media pages, advertisement of services was suggested to be targeted in community spaces across Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent, specifically schools, bus stops, supermarkets, hospitals, clinics, and doctors.

Being engaged in some way with an Alice Charity service was also seen to be a gateway to understanding more about what the charity does as a whole:

*“Coming to Big Cup has helped me know more about Alice Charity”*

Services like Big Cup, which extend into lots of different communities across Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent, can prove to be the gateway for community members to access other parts of what Alice Charity offer. Sharing information through Big Cup and all other services would allow awareness to be increased without significant investment into new advertising streams.



A word cloud made up of responses from the service awareness team's community consultations.

## Recommendations coming from the research

As part of the Get Talking research, members of the two groups came together to analyse the findings, gathered from direct conversations with families in their homes and information shared at the Peoples Pantry and Big Cup. Actions to address the main themes from the research were outlined as part of the 'Action' part of the Get Talking cycle.

The recommendations and actions have been constructed taking into consideration the limited capacity of the charity and its staff to be able to deliver actions to meet family needs. The suggested actions have been split into short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals.

The main areas that the recommendations address is improving the promotion of Alice Charity services, so more people are aware of the support on offer, responding to the changing needs of families post covid and expanding services to meet the increased demand.

Short Term
Linking up with other agencies to signpost families to free services
Link up with Health Visitors to notify them about Alice Services
Advertise Alice Charity Services in different health service centres

The short-term actions outline the need to connect Alice Charity families with other services which are operating in the local area, managing capacity levels at the charity but ensuring families can receive the support they need through collaboration. Throughout the community research process, advertisement of the charity and its

services was mentioned as being something that needed to increase. The community research team suggest that networking with professional service providers to raise awareness of Alice Charity services, and remit, would aid to spread the word without significantly increasing demand on current staff duties. Additionally, linking up with other service providers to gain insight into their service provision would extend opportunities for families.

Mid Term
Update and develop the Alice Charity website
<b>Review and increase interagency</b> working across the charity
Set up a virtual helpline
Information packs/newsletters

The main consideration of these mid-term actions was to build on, and share, information between services internally, as well as signposting information with community members and families. The website was seen, by community researchers, to be one of the main places people will visit to gain information about the charity and its services, although functional it was considered that it would benefit from an update.

One of the main recommendations coming from the research team, following on from conversations in the community, was for the charity to develop a virtual helpline that would be accessible to community members that would otherwise struggle to access physical services inside normal working hours, or at all.

A newsletter was also considered to be an action that could be taken to share information about goings on at Alice Charity, making people more aware of what they do as a charity beyond the service that

they may access, as well as acting as another way to signpost people to information and services that may benefit their situation.

Long Term
Deliver Financial Education within schools
Develop Community Groups tailored to meet the needs of the area
Add More locations for Big Cup Groups
Develop Drop-in sessions at Alice with external agencies

The longer-term actions outline ideas which are capacity heavy and would require higher levels of investment from staff and the charity. The exploration of extending services and diversifying services to meet community needs is outlined, including more Big Cup locations, which were a huge benefit to families on their return and scale up following lockdowns, as well as their ability to share more information about what Alice Charity does.

The new Alice Charity building means that more space is available. Developing space within the charity to host drop-in sessions from other services would enable members of the community, who are already familiar with Alice Charity, to access services which they may otherwise be unable to access.

## Conclusion

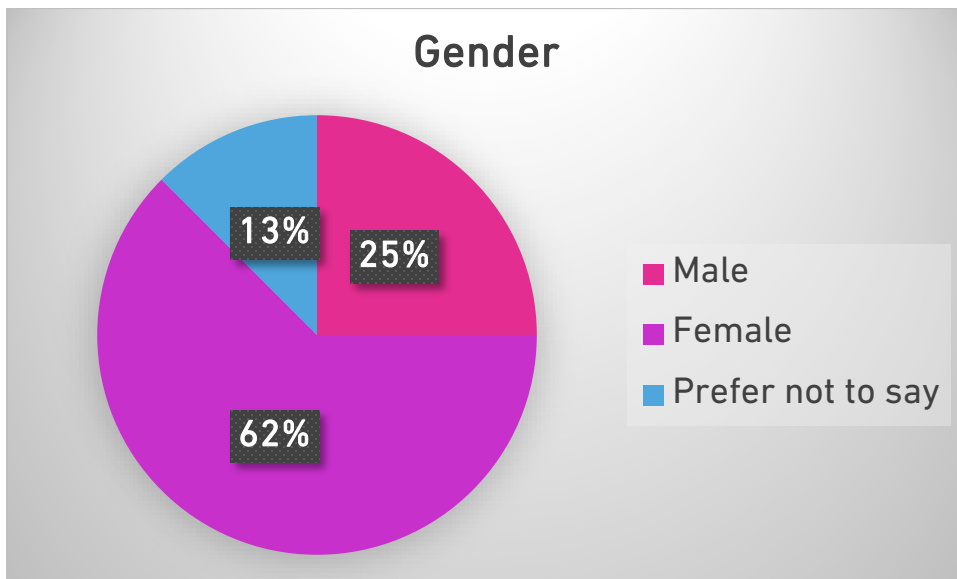
Considering the main research question, the information collected provides clear evidence of the positive impact that Alice Charity services have on families in Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme. One key thing to note is the significance of the response to COVID-19, the impact of the response is still noted even now in 2022, and families understand that Alice Charity services are there for them if they need them.

It is clear, however from the research that awareness of charity services, outside of Family Support, Big Cup, and Peoples Pantry needs to increase, even the awareness of these services themselves would benefit from being more known in the community. Community Researchers see that awareness could be raised through collaboration with other charities and professional bodies to increase awareness of current community offerings, as well as through internal collaboration of Alice Charity services. This ensures that maximum positive impact can be achieved for families with little impact on the capacity of the charity.

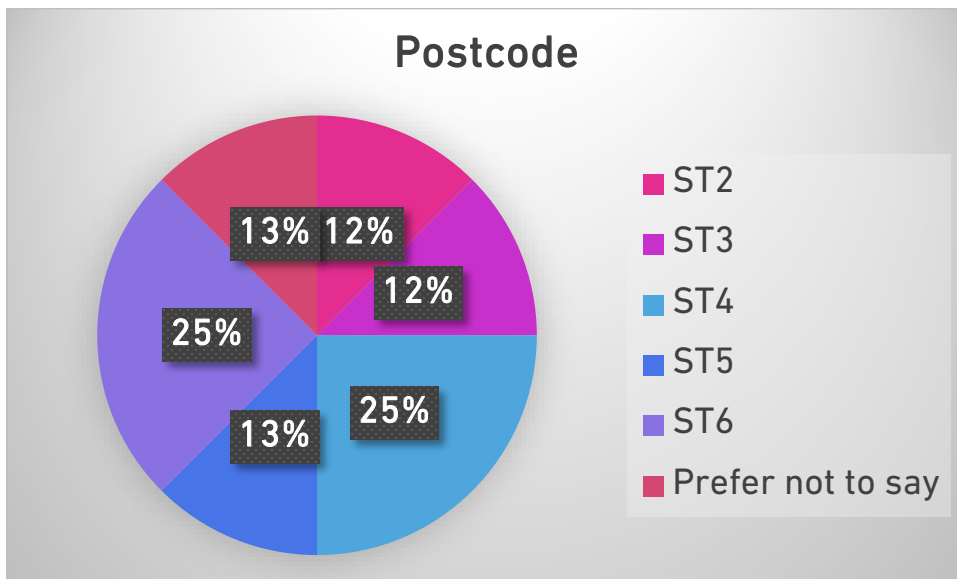
Additionally, increasing virtual services e.g., webchat and updated website, would allow members of the local community who either prefer online engagement or may be unable to access services in a physical capacity, to be able to access the charity outside of the current remote methods of engagement that are offered.

With the growing concerns about the cost-of-living crisis in the United Kingdom, the role that charities and organisations play in their communities is of even more significance. Taking into consideration the short, mid, and long-term actions enables flexibility to address new situations whilst also addressing actions outlined as part of the research process.

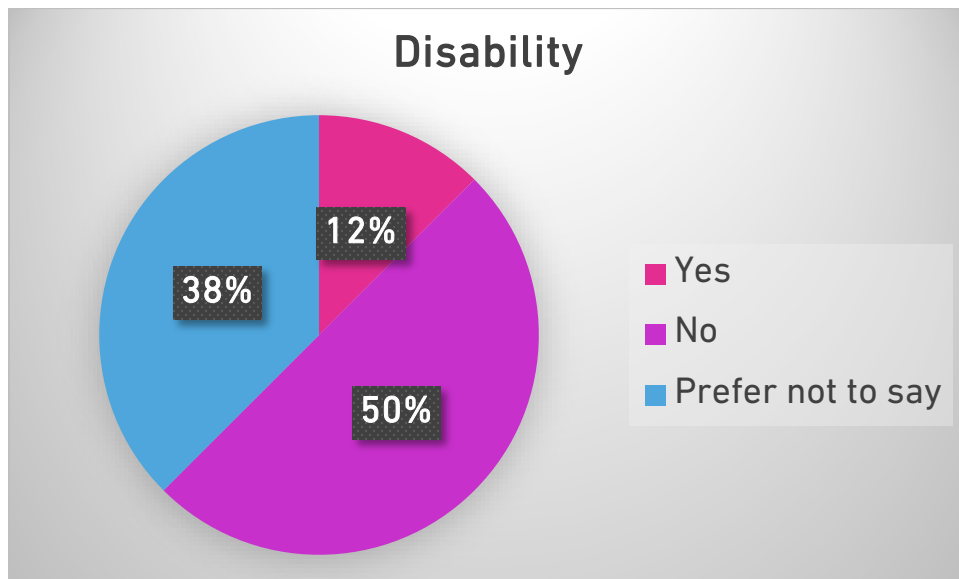
## Appendix 1- Demographic information from family conversations- Gender



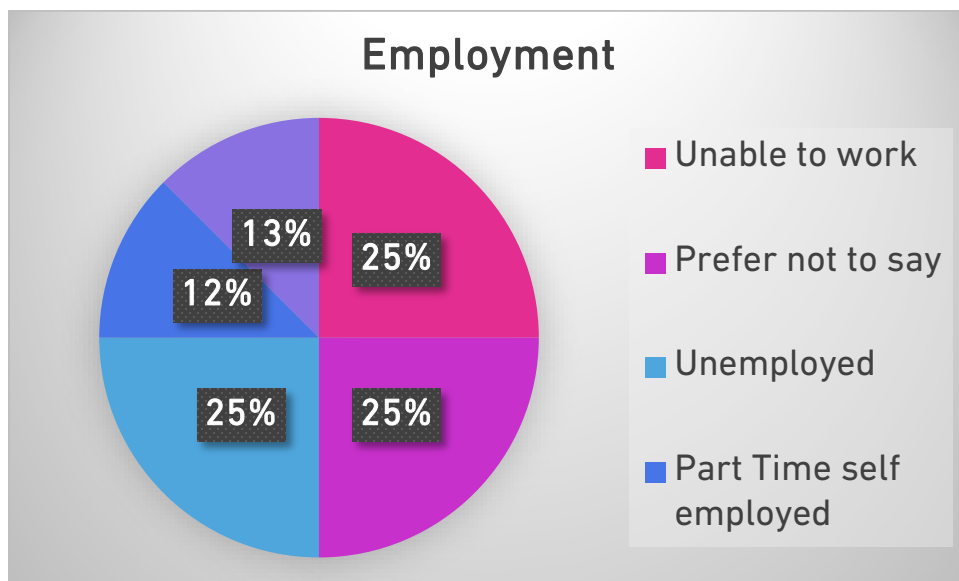
## Appendix 2- Demographic information from family conversations- Postcode



### Appendix 3- Demographic information from family conversations- Disability

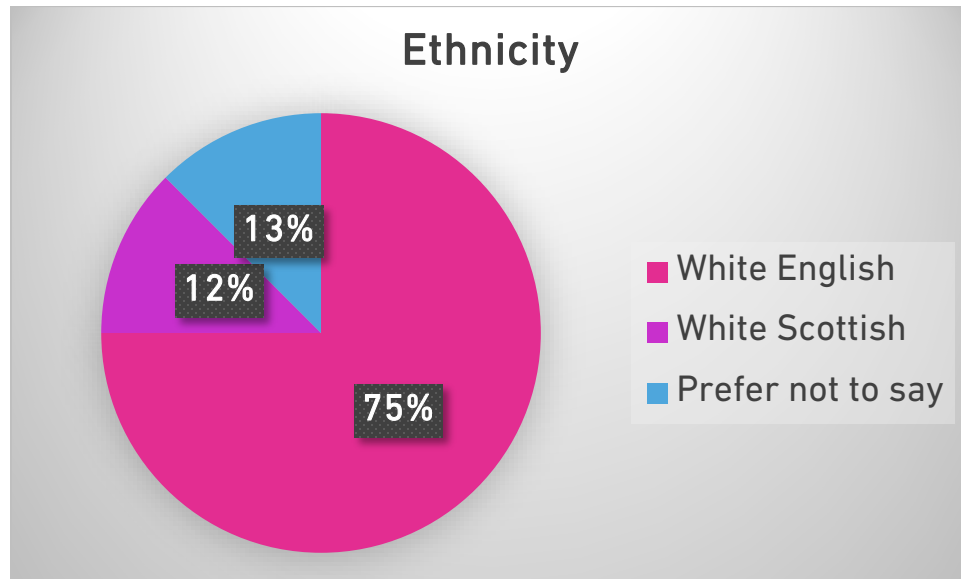


### Appendix 4- Demographic information from family conversations- Employment





## Appendix 5- Demographic information from family conversations- Ethnicity



## Appendix 6- Demographic information from family conversations- Age Group

