

# Michelle & Ryan

Constantly juggling



**Michelle and Ryan both work and have 3 children. They live in a privately rented house which is close to the family support they need to manage childcare.**

This pen portrait is about people like Michelle and Ryan who are managing the daily challenges of working shifts, looking after their three children and putting a roof over their heads. They are very proud of their family life but they do rely heavily on family support. However, they are often managing a fine balancing act and are anxious, as they know it would not take much for this juggling act to fall down.

Their house is an ideal size and great location for them but is privately rented and needs maintenance work. They are very reluctant to ask the landlord as they are scared of making him angry and being given notice on the house or the rent being increased. They keep their heads down and try to do the work themselves.

They need to 'juggle' or manage priorities against resources which often means they are pushed into what we have called a 'trade-off' zone. These trade-offs drive behaviour and, in conjunction with Michelle and Ryan's ability to take action when faced with a specific set of circumstances or challenges, will ultimately govern the level of vulnerability for their children.

## About Michelle, Ryan and their children

Michelle and Ryan are in their late 30s and live with their 3 children in a privately rented end terrace. They both work full time and do a variety of different shifts. They had to choose a house close to Ryan's parents who support them with childcare, before and after the school day, alongside other practical things around the house. Michelle worked part-time until recently, but with their youngest child now at school, she has returned to full-time work. This has helped a lot with household finances.

Family life is central to Michelle and Ryan's world and they are very close to Ryan's parents. They both have a few long standing friends but the shift work and family commitments means it is hard to see people. Going out with friends is difficult as they like to make sure they spend as much time with their children as they can. Besides, the kids take all the spare cash with things they need for school, birthdays and new clothes.

One of Michelle and Ryan's children has asthma. He suffers quite badly and on two occasions this has resulted in him needing to go to hospital. This is quite difficult as the hospital like someone to be with him at all times. This means that they spilt work, being at the hospital and caring for their other

Housing	Heating	Method of Payment	Ethnicity	Age	Employment Self	Employment Partner	Children	Income
Privately rented end terrace	Gas CH	Biling	White British	Late 30's	Yes	Yes	3 Children 6,9,11	Average

children between them. They would not have managed without Ryan's parents help.

They are really lucky because their local GP surgery has a practice nurse who holds an asthma clinic. She has been able to give them advice about the cold and how mould and damp can make the asthma worse.

Michelle and Ryan work hard and at the moment are able to balance their different responsibilities. They have a decent income and if they need extra money one of them will ask for additional shifts. It is hard though because they are already tired having to work long shifts anyway but they feel it is just what they have to do. They manage to meet all their commitments but should they experience reduced hours or lose their job they would not be able to cope. This worries them a little and they tend to keep themselves to themselves and just get on with things.

Michelle and Ryan have access to the internet but are not heavy users. They have a computer but just use it for very basic things. It is mainly used for social media such as putting photos of the kids on Facebook and for the kids to use to play games. Michelle and Ryan often get their information from the internet as well as local newspapers and through watching television. They do discuss things with their friends and Ryan's parents but get confused by the differing opinions.

## Michelle and Ryan's family home

Michelle and Ryan have lived in their privately rented, 3 story end terrace for 9 years. They always wanted 3 children and managed to find this house close to Ryan's parents when their oldest child was 6 month old. It is about 100 years old but has lots of rooms and a lovely garden for the children to play in. It is also close to the school which their children attend. Their home is the centre of their universe and close to everything which is important. They are happy and do not want to move but the house does have problems.

The main problem with the house is that it is damp and gets mould on the end wall. The old boiler and radiators struggle to heat the whole house. Michelle and Ryan have seen on the TV and in the newspaper that the cost of fuel is continuing to increase; this has greatly worried them as the boiler is not efficient. They have discussed the possibility of changing fuel provider to reduce their bills, but have been confused by their friends differing experiences and worried by the bad

experiences; so they have not done anything yet.

Michelle and Ryan are very aware that damp and mould are not good for their son's asthma. They know that the washing, which they dry over the radiators especially in the winter, can make the damp in the house worse, but they feel it is the only way they can dry clothes for 5 people. They have heard that dryers are very expensive to run and they would be worried about the energy costs.

***"No, yeah, it's [the damp] lower down in the corner. Now I've just changed his bedroom actually, it's not very big, because I had a box there with toys and I thought maybe it's because it's not getting air circulated or something, so I've now popped his bed there, but I just pull it forward a bit so that I don't know if that'll make a difference."***

Michelle and Ryan decided not to ask the landlord to make improvements and sort out the damp as he has refused to do things in the past. He has been very difficult to deal with and they are worried that if they make him angry by complaining about the house, he may give them notice or increase the rent. So they have worked additional shifts and together with Ryan's parents have made improvements with insulation around the doors and windows and new lined curtains which Ryan's mum made.

***"We try and make sure the house is warm enough and damp free. Our income is enough for us to pay for the improvements on the house but we have done nearly everything we can on it now."***

Michelle and Ryan feel that they are able to tackle these problems themselves and not have to involve others from outside. Having tried different mould removers, Michelle has found a chemical spray which seems to have got rid of the mould however she thinks it may have set off her son's asthma after she used it. The mould has not returned but she worries that the damp still remains.

# A day in the life of Michelle and Ryan

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Life is completely dictated by shifts and in Michelle and Ryan's life there is rarely a day the same. Michelle and Ryan try to keep Sunday free to play with their children and have a meal with Ryan's parents in the evening.

On a bad week, if Michelle and Ryan are both working the early shift, Ryan's parents sleep over to get the children to school in the mornings. They try not to let this happen too often though as their son has been coughing a lot at night lately and this has kept everyone awake. They have all been very tired the next day. The changes to the house seem to have made a difference in keeping things warm but he is still not sleeping well and Michelle and Ryan are worried as they are not sure what else they can do to their home to make it damp free.

The children get up at about 7am. Michelle, Ryan or his parents help the children to get ready and then they all eat breakfast. This is always prepared the night before, as are the children's school uniforms. In the cold weather the heating comes on at 6.30am to take the morning chill off the house. It then goes off at 8.30 when the children go to school.

If Michelle or Ryan are not working they tend to stay around the house. There is always washing to do and when it is nice weather, the washing is hung out in the garden to dry, but in the poor weather it is placed around the radiators.

The youngest children are collected from school at 3.30, usually by one of their parents but occasionally by one of their grandparents. On returning from school the children will play in the garden if it is warm enough, and if not, in the sitting room and play computer games. Although they can heat their house, they tend to only keep the sitting room really warm in winter. Ryan's parents bought the family a Wii game last Christmas and the children love beating Mum and Dad at the games. However, now the oldest child is at secondary school and has homework to do there is some conflict between TV watching, Wii playing and finding some peace and quiet to do her sums. If she tries to work in her bedroom she complains it is too cold and Michelle and Ryan sometimes go for the option which creates the least conflict, with the result that there is more TV watching than homework undertaken.

The children have a bath at the end of the day. Michelle and Ryan were told that the steam and humidity are good for their son and they think it helps settle him as he goes to bed. Once the children are in bed about 8pm, Michelle and Ryan prepare breakfast, organise the clothes for the morning and collapse in the sitting room. They are used to not sleeping well due to their shifts but the added disturbance during the night from their son means that by 9pm they are often exhausted and go to bed early.

## The impact on home heating behaviour for Michelle and Ryan

### Selective use of heating around children's needs

*– as the system is in-efficient and they cannot afford continuous usage. The house is not as cold since they made improvements but it is still quite damp, has condensation and mould.*

**Use of space within the home** – *they are able to use the space in the house*

**Children's development** – *They focus on their children and have family time however educational attainment could be impaired by the lack of a warm quiet place to study.*

**Health and wellbeing** – *The family are getting by but the shift work and disturbed sleep patterns will take their toll. They rely heavily on their parents – what will happen if they become ill or unable to help with childcare? Problems may also arise if they have to move away from this house.*

See the graph of Michelle and Ryan's house that demonstrates the variation in temperatures that Michelle and Ryan's children would have in their bedroom.

## The factors that drive Michelle and Ryan into the trade-off zone and influence their decisions and behaviour

### Primary drivers of behaviour

- Caring for family around shift work
- Housing conditions and tenure

### Additional drivers of behaviour

- Social connections and family support
- Only basic service contact – GP/Nurse
- Worry about getting by in the future

## What are the best ways to identify people like Michelle and Ryan?

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Michelle and Ryan work hard and have a reasonable income. They seem to cope well on the face of things but their life style is a juggling act and it would not take much for it to fall down. Their house has problems with damp, condensation and mould as well as an old and in-efficient heating system. However, they are fearful of their landlord and don't want to upset him.



The Segment	Contextual factors	Emotional and psychological factors	What this means to behaviour	How this impacts on their children
Constantly juggling	<p><b>Housing conditions and tenure</b> – privately rented home which has problems and needs work. Feel they cannot approach the uncooperative landlord</p> <p><b>Service exclusion</b> – only see GP/ Nurse and school staff</p> <p><b>Confusion/ lack of information</b> – not knowing where to go for more information and support</p>	<p><b>Fear</b> – that they will lose their home or their son's health will get worse or that they are not doing enough or the right thing.</p> <p><b>Responsibility and blame</b> – they want to provide a good family home and are doing all they know to improve the situation</p> <p><b>Lack of social connections</b> – only Ryan's parents to turn to or offer help</p>	<p><b>They are not seeking help from services</b></p> <p><b>They are making trade-offs</b> that are affecting their health and wellbeing</p> <p><b>They are becoming more isolated and reliant on Ryan's parents. What will happen if they cannot help anymore?</b></p>	<p><b>Health and wellbeing</b> is beginning to be detrimentally affected. They are tired and life is a bit of a treadmill for them.</p>

## How can we help Michelle and Ryan?

What might the interventions be?	Where/how do we talk with them	What are the barriers	What are the key messages?
<p><b>A mechanism to reduce isolation</b> and gain a support network</p> <p><b>A trusted contact</b> to offer support and sign-posting</p> <p><b>Reliable and simple information</b> accessible through appropriate channels of communication</p> <p><b>Advise on renter's rights</b> including contracts and repairs</p> <p><b>Access to pre and after school clubs</b></p>	<p>Michelle and Ryan do have some access to the internet and social media. Clear and simple sign posting would help.</p> <p>Local printed and broadcast media would help – case studies of people like themselves who are both working and have a family; who helped, what they did and the changes this has made.</p> <p>Peer support through work and social channels</p> <p>Professional support/referral through practice nurse.</p>	<p><b>Feeling of failure</b></p> <p><b>Embarrassment</b></p> <p><b>Fear of losing family/ independence</b></p> <p><b>For professionals</b></p>	<p><b>For professionals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Don't assume people are coping.</b> If something changes, they could quickly spiral into crisis.</li> <li>• <b>Cold and damp has a serious impact on health and wellbeing.</b> Not just physically but it can also lead to depression and isolation for adults and educational impairment for children</li> <li>• <b>Multiple factors can drive behaviour</b> – not just lack of money or knowledge</li> <li>• <b>There is help out there – get to know your local referral schemes</b></li> <li>• <b>Don't underestimate the power of the psychological factors</b> such as fear, blame and shame.</li> </ul> <p><b>For Michelle and Ryan</b></p> <p>Base messages around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That they have rights and have some protection</li> <li>• That there may be additional help with childcare and after school schemes</li> <li>• There are improvement schemes out there they can access despite being in a rented property</li> </ul>

Pen Portraits - Michelle & Ryan