

Inquiry into teenage pregnancy

Highland Children's Forum

1. This written submission is taken from a report by Highland Children's Forum published in 2012. The full report can be accessed on the Highland Children's Forum website at:

<http://www.highlandchildrensforum.org/userfiles/file/Recipe%20for%20Young%20Parenthood.pdf>

2. The report is based solely on the testimony of the young parents themselves.

3. The Highland Children's Champions asked the outgoing Highland Youth Convenor in 2009, Catriona Burns about what issues she, after her year of service, felt should be given priority. Young Parents was an issue suggested; a topic that had been raised by both young people and professionals to Highland Children's Forum previously. There is often a negative view put forward of young parents and it was felt to be an important issue on which to gather the views of those with personal experience.

4. After an unsuccessful consultation event it was decided to change tactic and to access established Young Parent groups via Early Years workers. These were selected in areas which would ensure a representative geographic spread, and visits were made to a session of each group. Some visits were also made to individuals who did not regularly attend groups.

5. Methodology developed for the "What makes a good life?" (HCF 2009) project was used. The young parents were asked to imagine young parent and asked to think about what would be needed for that young person to have a good life. A group discussion gathered the ideas of all the young people and a mind map developed with the 10 themes from the 'The Good Childhood' Study. This methodology enables the young person to put their view without it necessarily being autobiographical, though obviously their experiences will have informed their view. The young people were then asked to discuss what they, personally, had found helpful and unhelpful. The consultation worker facilitated the group discussion and drew mind maps for both a young parent with a good life and a young parent with a difficult life. This was done on A1 Magic Whiteboard™ so that the participants could see what was being written. Similarly the consultation worker scribed lists of what had been helpful and unhelpful during group discussion.

6. Altogether 22 young parents contributed, including 3 fathers. Most were in the 16-20 age bracket. One group included 2 over 20, though they had been under 20 when they became parents.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

7. The proximity of family and the consequent emotional and practical help they can give seem important. Family living at a distance and consequent lack of help and support were seen as more detrimental than poor relationships or disapproval.

8. Health concerns overall were much more around mental health than physical, suggesting that young parents are experiencing more difficulty with this aspect of health. The results suggest that the young parents seemed very aware of what was detrimental to health but perhaps less aware of what contributes to good health. They get along by avoiding bad health rather than making active choices to ensure good health.

9. Housing and transport issues were very important. The young parents seemed to regard stable housing as important and did not have high expectations of what it should be, as long as it was not temporary. Interestingly, a garden was important and was seen as a safe place for the children, particularly if there were no amenities nearby (e.g. playgrounds) or if the area or the neighbours were considered undesirable/unsafe. Transport is a key aspect of these young parents' lives as they almost all have to rely on public transport. This is clearly very difficult with baby, shopping etc but is also expensive. The alternative of shopping locally where there is possibly less choice, less fresh produce and higher prices is not helpful. Public transport is also their only option to get to medical and other appointments and is also seen as a significant barrier to employment.

10. Friends did not feature significantly as having been either 'helpful' or 'unhelpful'. It could be that the groups, whilst aware of the positive and negative effects friends can have on the quality of life did not, themselves, experience issues with friends. Or perhaps the young parents accepted that their lives and those of their friends had moved on in possibly very different directions. There seemed, anecdotally, to be a reliance on social networking as a means of maintaining friendships.

11. There was a surprisingly high level of acknowledgement of the importance of learning and qualifications. These young people were clearly bucking the stereotype of young parents as disaffected with learning, though they had disengaged with it. An appetite for learning parenting skills also clearly exists.

12. In discussing attitudes and behaviour they felt that people were prejudiced against them and hence made judgements e.g. that because they were young they would be drinking and that if you are a young parent it will be your children `who will be in trouble`.

13. Whilst the young parents seemed to value their leisure time there seemed to be an acceptance that for young mums it would consist of socialising and the Young Parent groups seem to substitute for that.

14. Within the theme of money these young parents seemed to have a

willingness to work and to see having a job as essential to a good life, but are realistic, if not pessimistic about their prospects. The benefit system seems to be the source of much frustration and anxiety with delays and paperwork being most commonly cited. The costs and availability of childcare and of transport were significant barriers to employment.

15. The young parents, as expected, had much to say about the services they receive, both positive and negative, with young people reporting that attitudes and behaviour of individual health visitors, doctors, social workers and bus drivers had been unhelpful. The groups, without exception, were vociferous on the topic of prejudice and negative attitudes; one person summed it up as 'we are not heard or believed'. The young people also gave numerous examples of positive attitudes towards them, so it is not a case of them unjustifiably feeling persecuted.

16. The quality of their experience seemed to depend on the individuals they were dealing with and the experience they had had; whilst the mechanisms were in place and there were no criticisms of the care they received many had negative comments about the attitudes of individuals they encountered. This was true of health services, social services, housing officials, and bus drivers. Their over-riding need was for the impartial advice and support of the professionals they encountered and they particularly valued professionals who did not judge them for their status as young parents.

17. Health visitors and early years workers were particularly valued for their willingness to discuss a wide range of issues. This is particularly important for this group of parents who, by virtue of their age can be expected to need more advice and support in order to be confident and capable in life generally, let alone as parents. Citizens Advice Bureau and Calman Trust were also singled out for praise as they gave the young parents practical help with the bureaucracy they encountered in dealing with housing and benefit issues, ranging from filling in the forms to use of the computer or telephone.

18. There was some concern about lack of consistency both of advice, and of personnel, with reports of 3 different midwives during one mum's pregnancy, health visitors and social workers changing frequently, and long periods without.

19. The hospital experience was an on-going concern for 1 group who lived in a remote location, over 100 miles from Inverness but had to travel there for many medical services as well as maternity services. The issues were not just around the expense of travelling, though that was dominant, but around inconvenient appointment times meaning either a very early start or overnight stays. There was some concern from this group that they perceived services were being cut locally and that this would exacerbate these issues.

20. It was also felt that professionals do not communicate well enough with each other and that the young people frequently had to repeat the same things to each one. There was no mention of any professionals associated with education—this could be because the young people had had to

disengage with education.

Conclusion

21. It is clear that whilst there are a number of positives for young parents there are also a number of negatives making life unnecessarily difficult.

22. Though some of the difficulties are associated with small children and are common to any parent the young parents experience a range of difficulties additional to that, associated with bureaucracy, housing benefits, childcare and transport, reduced job prospects, straitened finances and the societal and family attitudes they meet with and all at a time in their lives when they have not had a chance to develop life skills and are perhaps coping with the normal adjustments of adolescence.

23. The difficulties that they found most unhelpful were the lack of childcare and transport as these were seen as the major barriers to working and to education which they saw as improving their employability. The topic on which they were most vociferous was attitudes, and though they had positive comments about all services they also had negative comments about all of them too. It would appear that whilst services have the wherewithal to provide a good experience it is often marred by the attitudes of individuals within those services.

24. Most beneficial to the young people were the families, organisations and individuals who supported the young parents regularly and gave advice and practical help with whatever they found difficult, even when it was outside their remit. Young parents seem more at risk of reduced well-being as they often have significant deficits of protective factors - of life skills, confidence and resilience by virtue of their age, of friendship and support because of their circumstances, of education, prospects and financial means.

25. That health, leisure and friends do not seem as important to them is perhaps due to lack of time and changed priorities. They seem realistic, even pessimistic, in their expectations with regard to housing, job prospects and finances.

Recommendations

26. **Advice and Support** is of paramount importance both in terms of practical help but also in respect of the well-being of these YP. Young Parent groups are very much valued for the opportunity they provide for both professional and peer support.

27. However attendance at these is patchy due to a number of factors:- transport issues, practical issues of time, baby's routine, illness, unwillingness of YP to engage in group situations. A more individual approach where the YP could be also supported more holistically in the context of their own home and circumstances is needed.

28. **Continuity and consistency** of provision is needed, not just of services but of the individuals providing the service.

29. **Transport** emerged as a huge issue with dependence on public transport being almost universal in the sample. Transport should be affordable, frequent, convenient so that YP can access employment and the services they need.

30. **Attitudes** of individuals is perhaps a training issue. It is hoped that as the GIRFEC approach becomes embedded in services and training that this will improve. Consideration needs to be given to ensuring that public services, such as transport workers have some awareness of their responsibilities to clients in this respect, and indeed some regard for Equality legislation.

31. **Childcare** along with transport was seen as a huge barrier to employment. Policy should ensure that affordable childcare is available and at flexible times, including evenings and weekends to reflect working patterns.

32. **Housing** allocations should take account of the YP's wider needs and circumstances, (not just of the need for a roof over their heads) e.g. proximity to essential support that family and services can provide and to employment.

33. The experience of these young parents may or may not be typical and the recommendations arise from the testimony they have given.

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