



Young people, Young parents

A study of the experiences of young people seeking advice and support with sexual health, pregnancy, and parenthood in Aberdeen

Learning Network North and Aberdeen Foyer

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Introduction

This small scale research project grew from the wish of a range of organisations in Aberdeen in enhance youth participation in decision making and service development. A Steering Group was formed in February 2009 and its members, who represented a range of agencies in the voluntary and statutory social services, highlighted a particular need to examine the provision of services for teenage parents in Aberdeen. Following further consultation and discussion it was agreed that it would be beneficial to engage directly with young people to determine their views about sexual health, ante-natal, and parenting services for young people. Subsequently it was agreed to extend the consultation to young people living in Aberdeenshire who accessed these services in Aberdeen. The Steering Group assumed overall management of the study and met regularly between February and October 2010. The study was commissioned by Learning Network North and managed by Aberdeen Foyer, a charity that works to prevent and alleviate youth homelessness and unemployment.

Background

Promoting positive sexual health is seen as a major public health challenge in Scotland. The UK has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Western Europe (UNICEF, 2001). Vulnerable young people, including those who are living in deprived areas, are or have been looked after by the local authority, are homeless, misuse drugs and alcohol, or are under-performing at school are amongst those most likely to become pregnant at a young age. Whilst the rate has declined overall in Grampian, teenage pregnancy in Aberdeen City remains above the Scottish average, especially in more deprived areas (NHS Grampian, 2006). We also know that, whilst parenthood can be a very positive life decision for some young people, that it can also bring negative consequences for parents and their children, including health problems, and barriers to education, employment, and adequate housing (Swann et al., 2003). There are also concerns about rising levels of incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly Chlamydia, in young people in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2005).

NHS Grampian (which provides health services in Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Grampian) and its partners have implemented 'Respect and Responsibility: A Strategy and Action Plan for Improving Sexual Health' (Scottish Executive, 2005). The national strategy emphasises the importance of mutual respect and trusting relationships built on strong values in the fostering of sexual well-being. Improving sexual health is seen as requiring a holistic approach to underpin three main areas for action:

- Promoting respect and responsibility
- Preventing sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy through education, service provision and support
- Providing better sexual health services which are safe, local and appropriate

The national strategy recognises that its success will depend on involving young people as well as parents, carers and key support and clinical services in meeting these aims.

The local strategy, developed by NHS Grampian and its partners, aims to improve the sexual health and well being of local people. Its objectives include the need to ensure that local people have access to sources of information and advice on sexual health and relationships and that services are re-designed to meet the needs of 'hard to reach' groups. These groups may include members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender population, people with physical and learning disabilities, transient populations, and people from local ethnic communities (NHS Grampian, 2006).

Grampian's Sexual Health Strategy has also highlighted the need for evaluation of the range of sexual health services across the area. This study aimed to make a contribution to our understanding of the views of young people in Grampian about their access to and their perceptions of the quality of sexual health, pregnancy, and parenting services available to them.

Aims

The aim of this study was to explore the views of young people of sexual health, pregnancy and/or parenting services in Aberdeen. These services included those providing information, advice and/or support.

More specifically this study sought to explore three questions:

- Do young people know where to go to get information, advice and support?
- Are the services providing the information, advice and support young people feel that they need?
- How can services be improved?

Methods

A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was devised to gather the perceptions of young people (over 16) in relation to the questions above. Basic demographic data was also collected: gender, age, and post-code. Young people were not asked for their names or contact details, but could choose to provide these if they wished to share the story of their experiences of services to create an anonymised case study at a later stage.

The questionnaires were distributed at two events:

- The Aberdeen Foyer Health Fair (Aberdeen, June 2009)
- The Wizard Festival (New Deer, Aberdeenshire, August 2009)

At the Health Fair young people were given the choice of how to engage. They could either complete the paper based questionnaire by themselves or were individually taken through the questions in a more interactive and unique way using the skills of an animator from UshUsh,

a theatre group. At the Wizard Festival young people could complete the questionnaire by themselves or obtain assistance from Aberdeen Foyer staff to do so.

An online SurveyMonkey™ questionnaire covering the same questions was also designed and made available to young people.

Participants

Twenty eight people participated in the paper-based survey but there were no responses to the online survey, and no follow up with young people to develop anonymised case studies. Although the questionnaire had originally been designed for the use of young people when it was made available at the Health Fair and Festival a wider age range expressed interest in involvement and completed questionnaires. Thirteen participants were aged 24 or under, whilst 15 were over 35.

Table 1: Participants by gender and location

Event	Gender		Location		Total
	Male	Female	Aberdeenshire	Aberdeen City	
Aberdeen Foyer Health Fair	12	7	3*	16	19
Wizard Festival	3	6	0	9	9
Total participants	15	13	3*	25	28

* The three young people from Aberdeenshire had travelled from rural locations to access services in Aberdeen City.

Table 2: Participants by age

Event	16-24	25-34	35-49	50+	Total
Aberdeen Foyer Health Fair	7	8	2	2	19
Wizard Festival	6	2	1	0	9
Total participants	13	10	3	2	28

Findings

The findings from the questionnaire are summarised below. Some of the responses questionnaires completed at the Wizard Festival were clearly provided when the participant was under the influence of alcohol or other substances; some of these responses have not been included in the analysis.

Services accessed

The participants had accessed a range of information, advice and/or support services (see Table 3).

Table 3: Use of services

Service	Number of people
Sexual Health	17
Pregnancy	12
Parenting	15
No services	9

NB. Some participants had accessed more than one type of service

A range of services in both the statutory and voluntary sectors had been used. The most frequently mentioned sources of information, advice and support were in the statutory sector and were mostly NHS services:

- The NHS GUM (Genito-Urinary Medicine) clinic (3)
- NHS Family Planning (3)
- Local authority social worker (2)
- NHS Family Planning Clinic: Square 13 (2)

Finding out about services

Of the 19 participants who had accessed services 13 had known where to get help but nearly a third (6 participants) had not known. Participants had found out about services through a range of sources including substance misuse and mental health services, family centres, support workers and social workers as well as their own research.

Participants were also asked whether the names of services helped them to understand what they provided. Of the 24 people who responded to this question a third (8) did not think that service names were clear enough. For example, two respondents did not think that the title 'Family Planning' suggested that this service provided advice about Sexually Transmitted Infections. Another pointed out that the name 'Aberdeen Foyer' did not give any indication of the kinds of services it offers. GUM was also perceived as a confusing name for an organisation that did not give sufficient information about its services.

Quality of services

All but two of the 19 participants who had accessed services thought that they had got what they needed from these services. There were a number of suggestions about the way in which services might be made more accessible for young people. The most frequent comments were about the importance of listening to young people in a respectful way and providing good quality information that young people can understand. As one young person put it,

“The information has to be clear – and no blabber”

It was evident that three young people had experienced some discomfort in accessing advice and support, and one referred to his/her perception of judgemental attitudes from service providers. One participant suggested that,

“They could have more staff from similar age groups to make youngsters feel more comfortable.”

Participants were also asked whether there should be services provided for the exclusive use of young people. Only one respondent thought that services should be targeted in this way.

Gaps in Services

A number of gaps in service were identified, including the need for:

- More services for young parents and their children, including groups, activities, and training courses (4)
- Support for young people with substance misuse problems (3)
- Support for young people with mental health needs (2)

- Drop in services for all groups (1)
- Group-based advice for young people under 16 (1)
- Support for fathers trying to access parental rights (1)
- Help for children to develop relationships with their parents (1)
- Support for young parents who go back to work (1)
- Advice about how to 'handle' teenage children (1)
- Support for children with domestic abuse (1)
- Support for LGBT community (1)

Discussion and Conclusions

Although the number of respondents, particularly the number of younger participants, was low this small scale study raised some interesting questions about the accessibility and availability of services to young people in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire:

1. Availability of advice and information

Young people have stressed the importance of good quality information to correct myths about sex and contraception (Research in Practice, 2009). Access to good quality sex and relationship education has also been shown to reduce levels of teenage pregnancy (SCIE, 2004).

Whilst most of the participants in this study had known where to go to get the advice and information they needed, a significant number were unsure. In some cases the names of organisations did not clearly indicate the services they provided. Of particular interest was the wide range of agencies that young people obtained advice from, including specialist services to address other (but often related) health and welfare needs, such as mental health and substance misuse problems. This

finding suggests that staff in these organisations may play a key role in ‘signposting’ young people to appropriate information and advice. This underlines the importance of frontline staff in a wide range of services that young people may use (e.g. other health, leisure and education services) having the knowledge and skills to convey information about appropriate services to young people in an accessible way when they need it.

2. Values underpinning provision of sexual health services

Young parents have highlighted the personal and professional values that they think should underpin the provision of sexual health services, including the right not to be judged (Community Links, 2008). A small but still significant number of young people who responded to the survey had found the experience of approaching services uncomfortable, and, in one case, this was directly attributed to judgemental attitudes. Research has highlighted the need to work in partnership with local communities, and to select and train staff with the right skills to provide sexual health and pregnancy services (Swann et al., 2003).

3. Service development

Although feedback about existing services was generally quite positive, a variety of perceived gaps were highlighted in services during the research. The most frequently mentioned gap was in relation to support for young parents, and, in particular, their need for support from their peers, learning/ training opportunities, and activities for themselves and their children. Although only small numbers of young people from rural areas involved in the survey, there were some indications that issues of accessibility and transport were particularly significant for those young

parents in rural communities in Aberdeenshire, A similarly wide range of needs has been identified in research about promoting young parents' well-being, including the importance of opportunities for social life, better information and advice, and rest, relaxation and fitness (Community Links, 2008).

Other unmet needs mentioned during the research related to gaps in relation to mental health and substance misuse services, stressing once again the vulnerability of many of the young people who require sexual health, pregnancy and parenting services. This emphasises the importance of partnership working between the wide range of both universal and specialist services that may be involved in meeting young people's needs in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

Limitations of the research

The need for this research was identified by a number of agencies in Aberdeen that provide services for young people. However, in practice it proved difficult for all interested agencies to sustain their commitment to the research process over time and one of the key individuals who took on responsibility for this work moved posts during the study. These constraints had an impact on the potential for partnership working in design and implementation of the research, particularly in relation to involving key partners, most notably the NHS. These factors, which may well have related to the prevailing economic climate and resultant workplace pressures, also limited the scope of the research; for example, final participant numbers were too low for any extensive quantitative analysis, and the original intention of accessing more in depth qualitative data through interviews was not fulfilled.

Potential for further research

This small scale study is probably best regarded as a pilot study for further inquiry and research, especially in relation to the key issues identified in the research: young people's access to advice and information, their views about how information and services are provided, and perceived gaps in services (e.g. for young parents).

The research study started off with some broad aspirations which are indicative of local agencies' concerns about this very important area of provision for young people. At the same time the ambitious scope of the research made it difficult to provide sufficient focus on any one type of service; whilst sexual health, pregnancy, and parenthood are all closely inter-linked this very broad basis for the inquiry made it difficult to conduct the kind of detailed analysis that might provide convincing evidence on which to base further service development in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire.

It is suggested that any further research be developed through partnership with a range of relevant organisations, including the NHS. The selection of appropriate research methods and their potential impact on participants will be an important consideration in any further research. Further investigation of young people's views about potentially sensitive subjects such as sexual health would require to be based on very clear ethical principles (see, for example, Social Research Association, 2002) and would be likely to require ethical advice, and possibly approval, from the North of Scotland Research Ethics Service.

References

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- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2001) *A League Table of Teenage Births in Rich Nations Innocenti Report Card No. 3* Florence: UNICEF

Appendix 1: Questionnaire



We are interested in looking at services provided by different agencies in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire relating to sexual health, pregnancy or parenting for young people.

The information you provide us with is completely confidential, and will be used anonymously to form a small report, with an aim to try and improve services for young people in Grampian.

Have you ever used services in Grampian for information, advice or support for sexual health, pregnancy or parenting issues?

If **yes** will you indicate which? (please tick)

- Sexual Health
- Pregnancy
- Parenting

What was the name(s) of the services?

Did you know where to go to get this kind of help? (please tick)

- Yes
- No

If **no**, how did you find out where to go?

Were the services provided what you needed? (please tick)

- Yes
- No

If **yes**, Is there anything you would like to see improved to be more young people friendly?

If **no**, what do you feel the service was lacking?

Are there any other services that you are aware of? (please list)

What kind of services do you think are needed?

Do the services that exist have names that you can understand what they can provide for you?

- Yes
- No

Should these services be provided to groups of young people only or should they be provided to all age groups together?

- Young people only
- All age groups
- Don't mind

About you:

Are you?

- Male
- Female

Age:

Postcode:

If you would like to take part in further questionnaires or group work on this subject, or if you would like to share the story of your experience with this kind of services, and create a case study, then please leave your contact details below

Name:

Contact details: