

## **Pregnancy & Parenthood in Young People Strategy Consultation Response**

I welcome the opportunity to comment on the Pregnancy and Parenthood in Young People Strategy.

As Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, my role is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people across Scotland.

I very much welcome the approach taken by this strategy, which for the first time encompasses the needs of young people experiencing pregnancy and parenthood. This strategy takes a holistic approach, which puts young people at the centre of decisions being taken about them and encourages a flexibility of approach by all professionals working with them. It recognises and seeks to address the link between early pregnancy, education and social exclusion and complements a range of existing strategies and guidance, including the recent Conduct of Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education guidance. It highlights that young parents may require a wide range of support to allow them to parent successfully and to ensure that their own, and their child's, life chances are not restricted due to early parenthood.

I am pleased to note that the views and experiences of young parents have been sought and taken into account when drafting this strategy. I would hope that this engagement with young people can continue as the strategy is implemented, in order to ensure that it continues to meet their needs effectively.

As I am generally very supportive of the strategy, I have opted not to follow the set format for consultation responses. I have instead limited my comments to parts of the strategy which I believe merit particular praise, or where I believe potential gaps may still exist.

### Why Young People Need Extra Support

Whilst I recognise that, due to their ongoing cognitive development, young people can be 'prone to risk taking and experimentation as they learn to manage new capabilities and greater freedom' (p3), I am also conscious of the dangers in professionals making assumptions about a young person's behaviour solely on this basis. Specifically, I am concerned that the true reasons behind a young person's pregnancy may be missed (e.g. that they are being groomed/subjected to abuse). I note that the strategy does also make specific reference to identifying children and young people at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (p11), so would suggest it may be helpful to cross-reference these sections in order to ensure consistency.

### Sexual and Reproductive Health Services

I agree that knowledge of sexual health services should be spread across a range of agencies, in order to allow young people flexibility and choice in where they access support.

I particularly welcome the explicit recognition of the specific requirements of looked after and care experienced young people.

I would, however, urge there to be specific consideration of the difficulties some other groups of young people may experience in accessing information and advice.

Whilst the strategy does acknowledge that young disabled people are one of several groups more likely to experience early pregnancy, it does not fully explore the reasons for this. In order for practitioners to understand more about the barriers these groups experience, and to tailor local services, it may be helpful to explore this in more detail. For example, this might include highlighting that young people with disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse than their non-disabled peers. Where there is no suggestion of abuse, young disabled people may also be reliant on others to provide support, in order for them to access services. This can severely compromise their ability to independently seek confidential advice and treatment.

Young people living in more remote communities may also find it more difficult to access such support. Whilst transport and financial considerations are acknowledged as being potential barriers to accessing antenatal care for those living in remote areas (p20) these barriers also apply to young people seeking contraceptive and sexual health advice. I therefore support the strategy's suggestion that sexual health services should continue to be sited in, or close to, local schools.

The commitment in the new strategy to produce online resources for young people is particularly welcome for young people living in remote areas, although I would stress that these should always complement rather than replace local services. As peer support is likely to be more difficult to secure in these areas, it may be helpful to consider how online resources can move beyond providing factual information to providing a forum for young parents to share their own experiences and learning.

I note that there is currently no mention in the strategy of gypsy traveller young people. It would be helpful to ensure that their specific needs are met by this strategy.

#### National Youth Friendly Charter

I am supportive of the suggestion that there should be a charter to ensure that young people are aware that a service is 'young person friendly'. Such a charter can only succeed, however, where it is accompanied by widespread training for practitioners and informed by real-life feedback from young people using the service. With this in mind, I welcome the commitment on p33 of the strategy to multi-agency training and workforce education.

#### Peer Education

I welcome the recognition of peer education/peer support as being a valuable source of information and support for young people. I am pleased to see that this has been included as a key element of the new strategy and would hope that this will encourage those working with young people to implement peer education/support schemes widely across Scotland.

#### Ante-natal Services

I welcome the recommendation that there should be ante-natal services for young parents, including ante-natal classes specifically tailored to their needs. I would hope that these classes would offer the opportunity for health professionals to share both ante-natal and parenting skills

information. I particularly welcome the strategy's recognition that young fathers should normally be actively included in all aspects of their partner's pregnancy care.

### Stigma and Discrimination

The strategy highlights the views of young parents that they are often subject to stigma and discrimination in pregnancy.

I welcome the acknowledgement that such treatment may constitute discrimination under the Equality Act 2010 and therefore should not be tolerated. I would note, however, that in order to tackle such discrimination, young people will need to have the confidence to challenge professionals and will also need to be able to articulate exactly how they have been discriminated against. This can prove challenging, given the inherent power imbalances between a young person and professionals. Discrimination can also be subtle in nature, which can make it more difficult to submit a formal complaint. Again, I would suggest that wide-spread work force training, including the real-life experiences of young parents, should be key to ensuring that services better meet the needs of young parents.

I would also welcome a specific action point on this issue in the strategy to ensure that the services young parents access are both non-stigmatising and non-discriminatory. I believe this is necessary in order to meet the strategy's long-term goal of ensuring stigma in relation to pregnancy and parenthood for young people is decreased.

### Benefits/Financial Help

I welcome the announcement that the Scottish Government will work with CPAG, Young Scot and One Parent Families Scotland, in order to develop resources on the topic of benefits and housing. I believe this is helpful and will assist young parents in both claiming their entitlements and enforcing their rights.

### Information-sharing

I note that appropriate information-sharing features throughout the strategy, both in relation to supporting young people and collecting data to inform future service provision.

On page 32, there is specific mention of the data sharing provisions of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, as a means of developing future service provision. It is currently a little ambiguous which types of data are being referred to here (e.g. is this statistical data or sensitive data relating to individuals?).

It would be helpful in this section to reinforce the fact that sensitive personal information shared under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 should only be shared in line with principles of the Data Protection Act 1998. The young person's consent should normally also be sought to share such information.

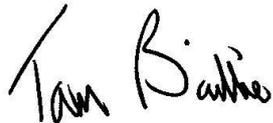
### Looking Ahead

I am supportive of the decision to appoint a National Lead to drive forward this strategy. I note that an Independent Advisory Group will also be required to produce an annual report, in order to assess how the new strategy is working. In line with the inclusive approach taken to date, I would like to

see a specific requirement included in the strategy to include the views and experiences of young people in any such report.

My own office has previously participated in the Pregnancy and Parenthood in Young People Steering Group. As such, I would welcome the opportunity for us to be represented on the Independent Advisory Group, in order to assist with the monitoring of this strategy.

Should you have any further questions about the issues I have raised in my response, please contact my Parliamentary and Policy Officer, Pauline McIntyre, via [pauline.mcintyre@sccyp.org.uk](mailto:pauline.mcintyre@sccyp.org.uk).



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