

The Teenage Pregnancy Journey



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Project Team

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1. Summary

a) Objective

NHS Newham's Health Improvement and Prevention Programme (HIPP) commissioned Community Links to research into Newham's teenage parents and young parents' social and emotional well-being needs and the related cultural issues amongst different demographic groups. The research outcome will be used to inform relevant local service delivery and commissioning.

b) Methodology

The project used a participatory action research methodology. A small group of teenage and young parents were recruited and trained as peer researchers to shape the research design, conduct 15 interviews and support the analysis and recommendation development.

Alongside this qualitative research two workshops were held with ten local (Newham-based) professionals who work with teen/young parents to understand their perspectives and experiences of teen/young parents' social and emotional needs and cultural issues.

c) Key Findings

Teen parents undertake a journey from discovering they are pregnant, the pregnancy itself, after the birth, returning to education and employment.

Similar to adults, the three main worries teens have when they first find out about any unplanned pregnancy are:

- **Deciding if they should keep the baby** – Pregnant teenagers need open-minded and judgement-free advice on how to make this tough decision and they also need information on the options and the risks (physical and emotional) involved in each choice.
- **Apprehension about the reaction of family and friends** – Pregnant teens are typically initially hesitant and have a sense of helplessness before sharing the news with their family and friends, particularly as most of the pregnancies are not planned. Most teenagers, as expected, are dependent on their family for financial, emotional, and social support. Without independence, breaking the news to family can mean being trapped in potentially physical and emotional abusive situations or being thrown out onto the streets.
- **Concerns for their future** – Education and career planning can be a key support for pregnant teenagers at the beginning stages of their pregnancy to help lessen the fear of an unknown future.

During their pregnancy teenagers often worry about the pain associated with the birthing process, and about the health of the baby. Through the normal maternity pathway they will receive this medical support. This is also the period when pregnant teens start seeking

supports with financial issues such as housing and welfare benefits to help pay for the cost of raising a child.

Teen parents experience a wide range of emotions once the baby is born. Some experience post-natal depression, and others feel insecure, fearful, isolated, helpless, but on the other hand many felt a sense of fulfilment, elation and happiness. Similar to any parents, the teen parents found the initial period of baby-caring to be exciting yet difficult. Teenage parents tend not to ask professionals for help when it comes to taking care of the babies, rather turning to family or friends.

The timeline for teenage parents planning to go back to education or employment ranges from once their child reaches a year old, ready for full-time nursery, to four years old and them attending primary school. The challenges teenage parents foresee in returning to education or employment are finding adequate and affordable childcare, emotional attachment with the baby, the transition from child-caring mode to education or employment, and planning and scheduling the two priorities – work or education and their babies, and possibly a third priority, their family.

d) Key Issues

- **Family and Friends and Relationships** Family is a very important part of the support network for teen parents. They are often the first line of support for those who maintain a relatively good relationship with their family. This means that pregnant teenagers who are not on good terms with their family are missing a big part of their support network. Typically friends and the community form the alternative support network, but if their teenage friends are not around, teenage parents can be very isolated.
- **Socialising need for Teen Parents and Babies** There seems to be a real need for providing a space for activities that allow teenage parents and toddlers to socialise. Most of the teenage parents do not have any opportunities to meet with other teenage parents, and are lacking opportunities to socialise. Activities include swimming, painting, baby yoga, baby massage, trip to the farm, playing balls at the park, and baby gym.
- **Accessing Support and Services** The main reasons given for not accessing support services or attending activities such as parent and toddler groups are that teenage parents can feel judged by professionals or other parents, do not feel welcomed at certain services or groups, and do not feel that they belong in particular facilities. Connexions services have been cited numerous times as a source of support that teenage parents access because of the previously established relationships or the services reputation amongst the younger population as helpful and friendly.
- **Housing Needs** Housing is a big and challenging issue for teenage parents in Newham. Many teen parents cannot find suitable housing in Newham due to the high rent cost, low quality of housing, and low availability of housing stock.

- **Institutional Support** Institutions like schools can play a big part in supporting teen parents. There is more of a likelihood of pregnant teenagers dropping out of school early and never returning due to emotional bullying from school mates or feeling judged by teachers or administrators.
- **Cultural Factors** Many of the teenage parent services focus on single teen parents, whereas in some cultures, young marriages and young parenthood is a much more common practice. In these instances, the family and the community do rally around and support the teenage parents. Because of a much tighter family structure, even when an unplanned pregnancy occur, family and the community do tend to rally around the pregnant teenager.

However, unplanned pregnancy for a young woman in some cultures is a shameful and face-losing issue. In these cases, some young women are scared of telling their families about their pregnancy and often need help to mediate potential conflicts with the family and the community. In addition, the likelihood of emotional and physical abuse can also be higher.

e) Conclusion

Many of the challenges pregnant teens or teen parents face are similar to those faced by adults. The difference is that pregnant teens or young parents encounter more prejudiced and judgmental attitudes, and as a result have less access to a support network or services. Offering support services and building a network of family and friends for pregnant teens or teenage parents are important early intervention strategies to break the cycle of disenfranchisement of those who are most vulnerable and empower them to build a healthy and productive family.

f) Recommendations

The following recommendations were been developed with the teen parent researchers, the teen parents we interviewed and local professionals.

Increased Information, Advice and Guidance

Pregnant teenagers need open-minded and judgement-free advice on how to make decisions on their pregnancy, and they also need unbiased information on the options and the risks (physical and emotional) involved in each option.

More youth friendly support services specifically for pregnant teenagers and teenage parents (such as pregnant teenager specific antenatal classes or teenage parents and toddlers group) will allow pregnant teenagers or teenage parents to feel more welcomed and comfortable accessing these services and increase their uptake. Teenage parents are looking for more physical activities to participate in, such as swimming and outdoor activities. This can be a more exciting way to engage teenage parents.

Young people and teenagers turn to the internet for information and assistance. Online tools can be an effective way to disseminate information and connect with young and teenage parents.

Tap into institutions or organisations that have first contact with pregnant teenagers or teenage parents, such as schools, hospitals, and GPs, to actively engage and inform the pregnant teenagers about available supports and services in Newham. Even better, use this opportunity to build a comprehensive service delivery network at the time of the first contact, so that the pregnant teenager or teenage parents are connected and supported at the onset.

Work with existing programmes that already have established relationships with young people in the borough such as Connexions, youth clubs, and youth programmes to embed support services for pregnant teens and teen parents. These existing programmes and services have established trust with the young people, understand the context and culture, and can provide advice on making the support services more youth friendly. Provision of support services at these places will also make pregnant teens and teenage parents feel more welcome to participate.

Support from and for families

Emotional support for pregnant teenagers at the beginning stages of their pregnancy is important. Helping pregnant teens build an alternative support network before breaking the news to their family can be an alternative solution to those who potentially will be rejected by their family due to their pregnancy. Dedicated and specialist staff and organisations are needed to support pregnant teens in this way.

Building the capacity of families, friends, professionals and communities to support pregnant teenagers and teenage/young parents will reduce their further isolation and enable them to plan for a better future. This again could be done through dedicated staff and organisations offering one-to-one support, IAG, as well as training course, written information e.g. pamphlets, and other forms of activities aimed at engaging and building capacity.

Meaningful relationships with family and friends will mean support for pregnant teenagers is sustained during pregnancy and after the birth of the baby. Therefore, supporting pregnant teenagers to build these meaningful relationships can have lasting impact for teenage parents. Better parenting and relationship courses and support from specialist organisations or staff could provide this.

Support from professionals

There should be a specific Teenage Parent Service in the borough, which

- a. Informs and educates young people about the realities of young parenthood
- b. Provides practical support for young teens who become pregnant or parents
- c. Acts as a central conduit for the range of professionals interacting with pregnant teenagers and young parents.

Mediation and conflict resolution support services to assist pregnant teenagers to break the news of their pregnancy to their families will help reduce instances of domestic abuse.

Build the capacity of healthcare professionals to work with teenage parents in a friendly and open-minded approach to ensure that teenage parents continue to approach healthcare professionals to assist in improving the health of their babies.

Assist pregnant teenagers with planning their future (education and career planning) at the beginning stages of their pregnancy, so that they can see their education and career path beyond their pregnancy and child-caring.

A comprehensive service delivery model/network for pregnant teenagers or teenage parents in Newham would be a more effective way of supporting them, which can allow professionals to come together and discuss their support from a client-centred approach.

Culturally sensitive services for the diverse demographics of Newham are important and this will encourage the diverse population of Newham take up the services offered.

Housing needs is a major concern for teenage parents in Newham. Many teenage parents suggested that the housing benefit system should provide auditors to ensure the quality of the housing is up to a basic housing standard, and to assist in advocating to landlords to provide housing in conditions that meet the standard.

To reach those teenage parents who are not connected to the system, deliver direct outreach through informal community and faith based groups. In our experience, this can be an effective way to connect with the diverse target audience in Newham and offer information on available services in a non-threatening way.

Teenage parents and pregnant teenagers have relied heavily on Connexions to provide important advice and information. The closing of two Connexions shops will have significant impact on the lives of teenage parents, as will the closure of, or reduction in, other youth services in the borough.

2. Project Objective

The objective of this research project was to conduct a qualitative needs assessment to determine Newham's teenage parents and young parents' social and emotional well-being needs and the related cultural issues amongst different demographic groups.

3. Context

a) Teen Parents in Newham

The UK currently has the highest teenage birth rate in Western Europe. Teenage pregnancy is higher in more economically deprived areas. A report in 2002 found that around half of all conceptions to under-18s was concentrated among the 30% most deprived population, who also had higher proportions of conceptions leading to a maternity (Health Statistics Quarterly, Volume 33, 2007). Successive governments have tried to reduce teenage pregnancy. In 2008 the underage conception rate in England & Wales was down 13% since 1998 (DCSF, 2008).

The key objective for Newham Council with teenage pregnancy is to reduce the under 18 conception rate in Newham by 55% by 2010 (measured from the 1998 baseline, through the government's Teenage Pregnancy Strategy). By 2009, Newham had achieved a 19.4 % reduction. Now Newham has the 13th highest teenage conception rate of London boroughs at 48.3 per 1,000 women aged 15-17 (Office for National Statistics and Teenage Pregnancy Unit, 2010). However this does mask significant differences in conception rates at ward level, with the Canning Town and Royal Docks areas and East Ham South ward having the highest rates in the borough. See section four. below for a more detailed breakdown on teen parents in Newham.

Newham Council and NHS Newham aim to prevent teenage pregnancies by:

- commissioning the provision of young people focused contraception/sexual health services
- strong delivery of SRE/PHSE in schools and other community settings
- targeted work with at risk groups of young people
- having a well-resourced youth service.

Once they have become parents they are supported by:

- improving child health outcomes
- improving teenage mother's and young father's emotional health and wellbeing
- helping teenage mother's and young father's to achieve economic wellbeing.

c) Community Links and HIPP

The Health Improvement and Prevention Programme (HIPP) commissioned Community Links to conduct a more considered piece of research into understanding more closely the social and emotional wellbeing needs of teen/young parents and their cultural differences. In order to strengthen local delivery and commissioning of relevant services.

4. Project Methodology

The project used a participatory action research methodology and engaged teenage and young parents as researchers to conduct the research.

As Community Links runs a number of projects working with young parents we were able to find and engage with them quickly. However the effect of external funding cuts and an internal restructure and winding down of specific services e.g. Community Links' Canning Town Connexions Shop made it difficult to recruit teenage parents to participate as peer researchers. Our Connexions advisors spent a significant amount of time disseminating the recruitment information, and making phone calls to encourage all of the teenage/young parents on the case database to take part. An honorarium was offered for their participation.

We recruited and trained a small group of three teen parents as peer researchers. Training consisted of research approaches and data gathering methodologies, as well as confidentiality, safety, etc. We also asked the peer researchers to help shape the research design. The researchers provided input from their personal experiences and identified key areas where support and services might be needed in Newham. Their input formed the basis of the interview questionnaire. A draft questionnaire was then developed and further refined through discussions with the peer researchers. See appendix one for a copy of the questionnaire.

The discussions identified that telephone interview was the most effective way of reaching teenage parents and young parents in the community, because of their schedules and availability. Two peer researchers took on the task of phoning the teenage parents on the case database and booking interviews. Forty teenage parents were contacted and 15 interviews were collected by the peer researchers between January-March 2011.

Alongside this qualitative research we held two workshops in March 2011 with ten local professionals who work with teen/young parents to understand their perspectives and experiences of teen/young parents' social and emotional needs and cultural issues. See appendix two for a copy of the workshop agenda used. The identity of the research and workshop participants will remain anonymous to ensure confidentiality.

The findings of the research were compiled and analysed by Community Links' lead researcher, as the peer researchers did not have the time to be involved in this stage of the project. They have commented on versions of this report, and their suggestions are incorporated.

5. Teen Parent in Newham Demographics

There is scant information about teen parents in Newham. What follows comes from sources at Newham Council (April, 2011) and Connexions (January, 2011), primarily the Connexions Core+ database.

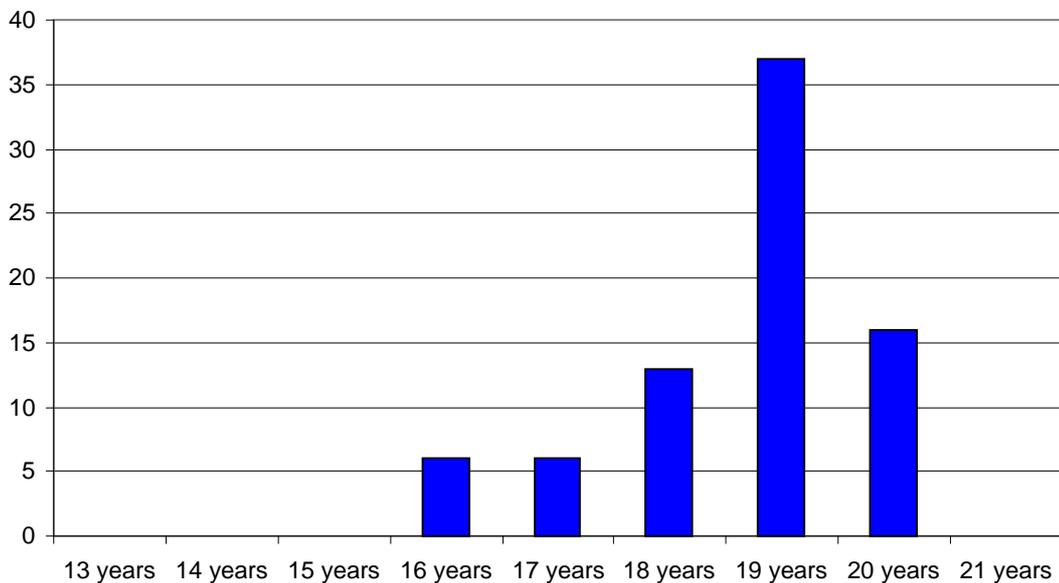
a) Numbers of Teen Parents

There are approximately 200 teen parents in the London Borough of Newham.

b) Age

The youngest recorded age is 16, with the majority of teen parents being in their late teens, aged 19 years old.

Table 1- Age of Teen Parents

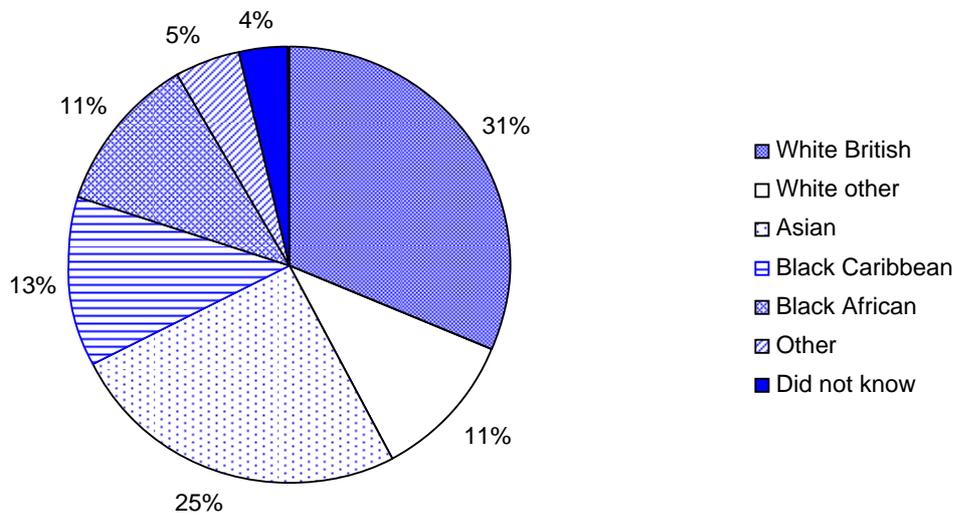


c) Ethnicity

The ethnic diversity of teen parents seems to reflect Newham's general population.

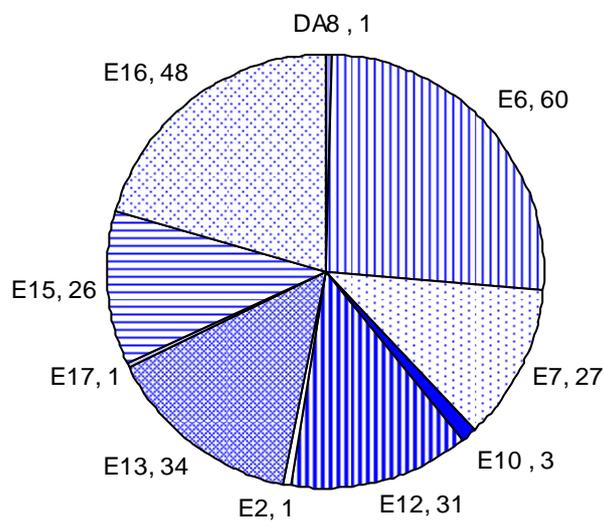
The largest ethnic group of teen parents is white British at 31%, followed by teen parents coming from an Asian background at 25%, Black Caribbean at 13% and Black African background at 11%.

Table 2 - Ethnicity of Teen Parents



d) Postcodes

Table 3 Location of Teen Parents

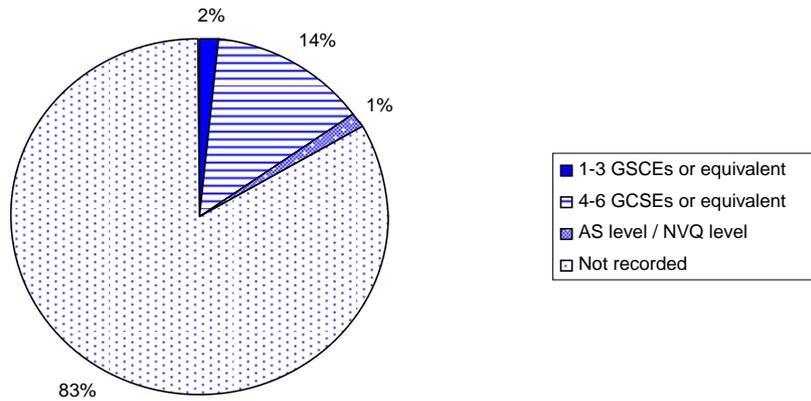


Teen parents in Newham live across the borough. They are not concentrated in one postcode particularly. The largest cohort live in E6 (27%) and E16 (21%).

e) Qualifications

There is very little information on teen parents' level of qualifications. There is no information available for 82% of teen parents. The remainder are generally achieving qualifications up to GCSE level.

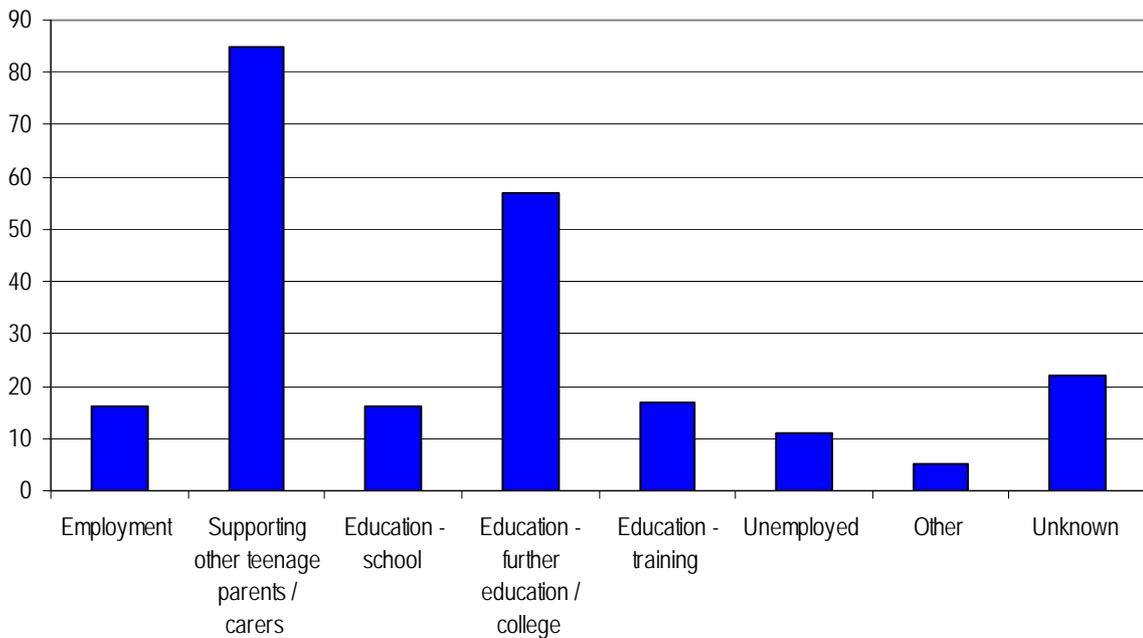
Table 4 - Qualifications for Teen Parents



f) Destination – what teen parents go on to do?

Teen parents move onto a variety of different things after having their first child – primarily returning to further education or the workforce, as well as supporting other teen parents.

Table 5 Destination of Teen Parents



6. Teen Parents' Pregnancy Journey

a) Finding out about being pregnant."

"It was nerve wracking to tell my family but once I told them their reaction, of being shocked but still very happy, made me happy."

"How was I going to tell my mum and school teachers"

"I was shocked that everyone was happy because I thought that they would be mad."

"Initially I felt very confused and rejected by most of my family, however my sister helped me."

"My mum was very angry when she found out I was pregnant but I wasn't bothered"

Similar to adults, the three main worries teens have when they first find out about any unplanned pregnancy are:

- deciding if they should keep the baby;
- concerns for their future;
- and apprehension about the reaction of family and friends.

Decision

Their experience of making the decision whether to keep the baby is often not openly discussed by teenage parents. Teenagers who just found out about their pregnancy are typically scared to seek advice on the options available to them. Teenagers are afraid of the additional judgement from others when discussing abortion. This means that teenagers have to rely on themselves or friends, if they are lucky, to discuss the issue. Making uninformed decisions can cause potential emotional trauma in the future. Pregnant teenagers need open-minded and judgement-free advice on how to make this tough decision and they also need information on the options and the risks (physical and emotional) involved in each choice.

Breaking the News

The experience of teenage parents we interviewed in breaking the news of their pregnancy to family and friends varied along a spectrum of surprisingly positive to extremely negative.

The common theme, however, amongst pregnant teens is the initial hesitancy and sense of helplessness before sharing the news with their family and friends, particularly as most of the pregnancies are not planned. Most teenagers, as expected, are dependent on their family for financial, emotional, and social support. Without independence, breaking the news to family can mean being trapped in potentially physical and emotional abusive

situations or being thrown out onto the streets. Helping pregnant teens to first build an alternative support network before breaking the news to their family could be an effective intervention.

As important as telling their family, is telling their school, friends, classmates, and the wider community. The attitudes of the wider community can often be judgemental resulting in pregnant teenagers feeling ostracised. Letting the professional service providers know about their pregnancy can also be difficult. Often, teenagers felt that they are already being seen through a negative lens when interacting with professionals – that they are judged as being inept or having behaved badly, which is why they sought help from professionals in the first place. Teenagers often fear that the professionals will further judge them because of their pregnancy. This can cause further isolation of pregnant teens.

Conflict Resolution Support

Professionals have seen an increased trend in pregnant teenagers requesting conflict resolution and mediation support to help break the news to their family and community. This indicates that the potential for conflict resulting in domestic abuse and violence remains a high possibility in the families of pregnant teens.

Future Planning

Many teenagers worry about what will happen to their future – for example, their education or career path – once they are pregnant. Education and career planning can be a key support for pregnant teenagers at the beginning stages of their pregnancy to help lessen the fear of an unknown future.

b) Pregnancy

“During the pregnancy I worried about pushing the baby out and how to get all the stuff I would need for the baby.”

“Will I be able to pay for everything as I had no income?”

During their pregnancy teenagers often worry about the pain associated with the birthing process, and about the health of the baby. Through the normal maternity pathway they will receive this medical support. This is also the period when pregnant teens start seeking supports with financial issues such as housing and welfare benefits to help pay for the cost of raising a child.

Although many of them voiced concerns over the birthing process, the majority of pregnant teenagers did not go to antenatal classes. Some of them regarded these classes as irrelevant. Others who attended the antenatal classes did find them helpful. Some pregnant teenagers found the antenatal class boring and irrelevant, and chose not to attend subsequent classes. To better connect with pregnant teenagers, it is important to create an antenatal class format that is more engaging and youth friendly.

Most of the pregnant teens we interviewed do attend their health check-ups regularly because they understand the importance of ensuring the healthy growth of the baby in the womb.

For teenagers who do not attend antenatal classes, the internet and midwives are their main sources of information. Family, surprisingly, was not cited as a source of information during their pregnancy. This may be because body issues are embarrassing for teenagers to discuss with their family. It can also be because there remains some tension between teenagers and their family during the pregnancy period.

Pregnant teenagers sought information on the birth process and on how to take care of the baby. If there are specific health concerns about the baby, they would go to their GPs or the hospital. Although the internet has proven to be helpful in providing a wide range of information, information unexplained by professionals can often cause unnecessary anxiety or worries amongst those who do not know enough about pregnancy and birth to interpret it correctly. Some teenagers we interviewed worried about things popularised on TV or news reports such as stillborn babies or cot death.

Another area of major concern for pregnant teens is meeting the basic needs once the baby is born. Some did try to seek support and advice in applying for benefits during their pregnancy. Pregnant teenagers tend to ask the professionals with whom they have already established a relationship or contact for support with benefits. Some credited their social workers' assistance in arranging benefit support, and some others went to youth advice services such as Connexions.

One concern voiced from the professionals' perspectives is the stage at which pregnant teenagers come to them to seek support. Professionals found it difficult to offer any concrete support (such as starting the application of benefits) when some teenagers come to them at the early stage of their pregnancy. The current policy for Employment and Support Allowance stipulates that pregnant women must be 29 weeks pregnant to be eligible to claim for the benefits.¹ The professionals' inability to offer concrete support, and sometimes having to turn the teenagers away, is a missed opportunity to begin the process of engaging with pregnant teenagers. To be able to establish meaningful relationships at an early stage is important in allowing professionals to provide future support and guidance, and early denial of support can deter pregnant teenagers from seeking other support and services.

This timing issue is apparently true for some other support and services, which means the application processes for many of the services and benefits a pregnant teenager needs will coincide. This can be one of the root causes of teenage parents or pregnant teenagers being unable to follow through on appointments because it is difficult to keep up with "everything happening at once." This adds unnecessary stress to pregnant teens nearing their due date, and can act as deterrence to seeking subsequent support.

¹ http://www.adviceguide.org.uk/index/life/benefits/benefits_for_families_and_children.htm

c) After the baby is born

“I was scared about if I was doing it right but then I found it quite easy.”

“When I first had the baby I found it tough as I was really scared.”

*“I found having to look after a baby enjoyable and a great experience,
I found the night feed difficult.”*

Teen parents experience a wide range of emotions once the baby is born. Some experience post-natal depression, and others feel insecure, fearful, isolated, helpless, but on the other hand many felt a sense of fulfilment, elation and happiness. Similar to other parents, the teen parents found the initial period of baby-caring to be exciting yet difficult. Caring for a newborn baby can be a joyful yet frustrating and exhausting experience, with endless sleepless nights, anxiety over the baby crying and not settling, and worrying about the baby not feeding properly.

Family for teenage parents becomes an important source of support, if available. Teenage parents in our interviews needed help with breastfeeding, night feeding, shopping for baby necessities, as well as day-to-day essentials like groceries.

Younger teen parents tend not to ask for help when they run into difficulties with child-caring. Professionals found that this is because teen parents do not want to be further judged by others as unable to take care of their baby. Sometimes, family and friends also want to give the teenage parents some space, because they are aware of the teenage parents' feelings and do not want to come across as interfering with the new parent's way of raising the child. This can leave teenage parents feeling isolated and alone to face some difficult challenges while caring for the newborn baby.

Teenage parents tend not to ask professionals for help when it comes to taking care of the babies. This can be due to the fact that teenage parents are seeking more practical support such as someone to help with night feeding, as opposed to knowledge or advice.

When teenage parents are worried about their baby's health, they first tend to contact family or relatives with experience of child-caring. Healthcare professionals such as GPs or NHS Direct are frequently contacted if their family or relatives cannot provide help.

For most of the teenage parents we interviewed, families do provide a significant amount of support, with shopping, giving practical assistance like babysitting for a period of time everyday, providing baby raising advice, and supporting financially. In addition, families can provide emotional support offering a sympathetic ear and words of reassurance to the teenage parents.

d) Returning to Education or Employment

*“I would be happy to get a job when the kids go to school.
One of the challenges I will face when I am trying to arrange childcare is
the fact that I do not feel comfortable
leaving my children with people I do not know.”*

The timeline for teenage parents planning to go back to education or employment ranges from once their child reaches a year old, ready for full-time nursery, to four years old and them attending primary school. The challenges teenage parents foresee in returning to education or employment are finding adequate and affordable childcare, emotional attachment with the baby, the transition from child-caring mode to education or employment, and planning and scheduling the two priorities – work or education and their babies, and possibly a third priority, their family.

Most teenage parents do not know what kind of childcare support they can apply for or receive, and do not know where to find out. Their biggest worry is about how to pay for childcare, and finding a trustworthy and suitable nursery to take care of their children. In addition to providing childcare information, building the capacity of teenage parents on how to find qualified and trustworthy childcare facilities (such as what to look for, what kind of questions to ask, and what to do when something goes wrong with the childcare provider) could be really helpful.

Just like any parents, being away from their children for an extended period of time can be emotionally challenging for teenage parents, especially for the first time. Supporting teen parents to navigate these emotions will be key to ensure that their return to education or employment is successful.

Furthermore, returning to a structured routine such as school or work can be difficult after a long period being away from this type of lifestyle. It can be made more difficult by the need to manage and integrate their own work or education schedule with the baby’s schedule. Support to plan and manage this transition will be important for teenage parents.

Career or education advice is also important at the stage when teen parents are considering returning to education or employment. Future planning is often a difficult and confusing task for teenage parents as they face the pressure of the need to provide for the family and yet not having the skills to earn an adequate income. Support from career advisers or schools can be very helpful, and the teenage parents we interviewed often looked to Connexions for advice in this area.

7. Key Issues

a) Family and Friends and Relationships

“My mum wasn’t happy initially; however my sister was very supportive when I first told them I was pregnant. During my pregnancy my mum still wasn’t supportive but she did accept the situation once the baby was born.”

“...and I felt that my family began to treat me more like an adult.”

Family is a very important part of the support network for teen parents. They are often the first line of support for those who maintain a relatively good relationship with their family. This means that pregnant teenagers who are not on good terms with their family are missing a big part of their support network.

Teenage parents do see positive changes in their relationships with their families after the baby is born. The teenagers see their parents and family become more accepting of the fact that their child now has a baby; and this fosters closer relationships whilst support is being given by the families to the teen parents. Where teenage parents live independently from their family, the distance created from living apart can reduce the instances of conflict. Teenage parents saw a change within themselves where they feel that they become more mature and more responsible. In turn, families tend to treat the teenage parents more like an adult.

“I noticed that once I had the baby all my friends disappeared.”

“I wish my friends would tell me more when they are going out so I could socialise more.”

Relationships with friends tend to be the opposite. Some friends might visit to see the baby when it is first born, but unless a very strong relationship or bond was built before the teenage parents became pregnant, friends tend to disappear after the teenage parents have the baby. This is partly due to the fact that the context (time, place, or activities) in which the friends of teen parents hang out or socialise isn’t suitable for the baby or the teenage parents anymore. Also teenagers do not tend to have the awareness, understanding, capacity, or interest to provide support for parents with young babies. Teenage parents and their friends no longer share a common framework for socialising, and being absent from school means teen parents can be forgotten by a circle of friends.

Teenage parents who do not have strong family support or are ostracised by their family will need an alternative support network to see them through the difficult period of child-caring. Typically friends and the community form the alternative support network, but if their teenage friends are not around, teenage parents can be very isolated. Helping teenage parents build an alternative support network is important.

b) Socialising Need for Teen Parents and Babies

There seems to be a real need for providing a space for activities that allow teenage parents and toddlers to socialise. Most of the teenage parents do not have any opportunities to meet with other teenage parents, or to socialise with their peers. This, alongside the fact that they may have lost contact with many friends, means teenage parents can easily become socially isolated.

Teenage parents can provide each other with mutual emotional and social support because they have similar experiences and this is an important support resource that has been lacking in Newham. It is equally important for the toddlers' development to socialise with other toddlers and if the teenage parents aren't attending parent and toddler groups, they are again missing a key developmental support. The closure of Sure Start centres and other children's services risks further negative impacts on teenage parents and their children's lives.

When asked about the type of activities teen parents would like to do with their babies, the activities tend to be a much more active and interactive – swimming, painting, baby yoga, baby massage, trip to the farm, playing ball at the park, and baby gym.

c) Accessing Support and Services

“I would feel welcome in services or groups if I was greeted politely and if everyone was welcoming.”

“Seeing other young people like myself would make me feel welcome in social spaces...”

The main reasons given for not accessing support services or attending activities, such as parent and toddler groups, are that teenage parents can feel judged by professionals or other parents, do not feel welcomed at certain services or groups, and do not feel that they belong in particular facilities.

Teenage parents do feel they experience negative attitudes and can be judged negatively, both by the general public and by professionals – for example, being told by midwives that they are not taking care of their babies correctly. The impact on teen parents can be particularly strong when they feel professionals are judging them. Teen parents do not necessarily have the capacity to advocate for themselves if they experienced negative treatment or were unhappy about particular services. The easiest solution is often to not access or attend the services anymore to avoid being in the same situation again.

It is important that professionals approach teenage parents with an open mind and understanding, because being judgemental of the fact that they are young parents isn't actually going to change it. Teenage parents already feel a sense of inadequacy because of their situation, and lecturing them or treating them as if they have done something wrong

will only lead to further disengagement by teenage parents. Meaningful engagement begins with a friendly and accepting environment.

Many teenage parents do not attend groups because they do not see their peers at these groups and do not find the activities relevant or exciting. For example, many of the young parents and toddlers groups, even though they are advertised for young parents, tend to have parents who are in their mid '20s to early '30s. Teen parents do not really feel that they belong and will often feel that they would stand out being the youngest parent there.

Connexions services have been cited numerous times during the research as a source of support that teenage parents access because of the previously established relationships or the services reputation amongst the younger population as helpful and friendly. Many teenage parents also connected to other young parents through Connexions.

d) Housing Needs

"It was bad because I was homeless as there was no space at my parents' house so I had to get a solicitor which took long."

"I found the whole process of finding a suitable place for me and my baby to live very long and difficult. Thus the reason I am currently living with a friend in a one bedroom apartment, but I am moving to a mother and baby unit soon. I am happy about this as I will have my own bathroom and kitchen. In the future I would like to apply for a two bedroom apartment."

"... I was told there is not much help around housing for 17 year olds."

Housing is a big and challenging issue for teenage parents in Newham. Many teen parents cannot find suitable housing in Newham due to the high rent cost, low quality of housing, and low availability of housing stock.

Dealing with the housing benefits officials can be difficult. Teenage parents often have to either try advocating for themselves or have an advocate to assist them in getting adequate support.

Most teenage parents who are not living with their families are on the Newham Bond Scheme with housing benefits. This scheme pays the rent to the landlords directly. Not all landlords accept the bond scheme, apparently because it often takes too long for landlords to receive rent payment. Due to this, the availability of housing stock is limited for teenage parents. Teenage parents often find the quality of the housing stock to be extremely low given the fact that the bond scheme can pay up to £900 per month for housing. Some teen parents have seen dirty, small, or ill-equipped places that charge £900 to the bond scheme.

Teenage parents also found that dealing with landlords tends to be difficult while on housing benefits. Landlords often do not respond to requests such as mending broken appliances or fixing inadequate heating. The quality of the housing therefore deteriorates over time.

Because teenage parents on housing benefits have limited options and are not the paying customers, they do not have proper recourse to advocate their landlords improve their housing condition and can feel trapped in inadequate housing.

e) Institutional Support

“Yes, I get my school teachers still calling me and asking me what I want to do.”

Institutions like schools can play a big part in supporting teen parents. There is more of a likelihood of pregnant teenagers dropping out of school early and never returning due to emotional bullying from school mates or feeling judged by teachers or administrators. Schools can support pregnant teenagers by bringing in external teen parent specific services, as well as incorporating a more flexible timetable for classes and exams, and extra tuition. This additional support allows pregnant teenagers or teenage parents to stay in school as long as possible, increasing the likelihood of completing their education, which widens their options when they are thinking about returning to education and employment.

f) Cultural Factors

Many of the teenage parent services focus on single teen parents, whereas in some cultures, young marriages and young parenthood is a much more common practice. In these instances, the family and the community do rally around and support the teenage parents. Because of a much tighter family structure, even when an unplanned pregnancy occurs, the family and community still provide support to the pregnant teenager.

However, unplanned pregnancy for a young woman in some cultures is a shameful and face-losing issue. In these cases, some young women are scared of telling their families about their pregnancy and often need help to mediate potential conflicts with the family and the community. In addition, the likelihood of emotional and physical abuse can also be higher.

Because of the tightly formed family and community structure around the pregnant teenagers in some communities, pregnant teenagers tend to be insulated from the wider society and become unconnected to services available in the area. They either become isolated and helpless or they go to access services further outside of the community to avoid identification. It can also be difficult for service providers to reach into the community and connect with the teenage parents to offer support when a strong family and community structure is in place.

Culturally sensitive services for teen parents can help teenage parents from different cultural backgrounds to access the services. Culturally sensitive services can include staff who have relevant knowledge about cultural and religious practices, so that the services are provided within the cultural context. Often when clients do not see people with similar backgrounds access the services, they do not feel that the services are for them.

9. Gaps Identified for Further Investigation

a) Teen parents unknown to social services

There are questions around the teen parents or pregnant teenagers who are unknown to local social services. There are two main groups that fall under this category - teen parents from cultural backgrounds where the family and community structures are strong, and teen parents who move to or away from the borough due to variety of issues such as finding adequate housing. These teenagers tend to fall through cracks in the system because they often do not access local services because of either the strong community ties, or lack of knowledge of available services due to relocation.

Health services are the first point of contact for many of these teen parents. They are often under-utilised as a key point of entry to engage with young parents. Further investigations are needed to understand how this might work in practice. Every pregnant teenager will need some kind of health support, and because they will tend to attend regular health check-ups, this can be a useful point of access to provide information on services available to them. Creating some kind of outreach strategy in collaboration with healthcare professionals can be a very effective way of reaching out to all teen parents.

b) Parenting Skills

One topic not discussed in our research is the topic of parenting for teenage parents. Teenage parents are often overwhelmed by their circumstances and their priorities are to ensure that the baby is healthy and that the basic needs are met. Rarely teenage parents discuss their parenting philosophy, parenting styles, parenting skills, and aspirations for their children. Although there are some courses that teen parents have identified as very helpful, the number of people who have undertaken the course remains small. Engaging teenage parents to discuss their parenting skills and ideas is an important early action strategy.

c) Service Providers

Although many service workers in Newham work with teenage parents or pregnant teenagers, there are no dedicated support services for teenage parents. Some have closed as a result of the cuts to local funding. Surprisingly, many of the workers that attended our focus groups do not know each other although they all provide support services to young people. There is a need to establish a comprehensive service delivery model to enable service providers to collaborate together on providing a youth/teen parent-centred service delivery model.

10. Recommendations

The following recommendations were been developed with the teen parent researchers, the teen parents we interviewed and local professionals.

a) Increased Information, Advice and Guidance

1. Pregnant teenagers need open-minded and judgement-free advice on how to make decisions on their pregnancy, and they also need unbiased information on the options and the risks (physical and emotional) involved in each option.
2. More youth friendly support services specifically for pregnant teenagers and teenage parents (such as pregnant teenager specific antenatal classes or teenage parents and toddlers group) will allow pregnant teenagers or teenage parents to feel more welcomed and comfortable accessing these services and increase their uptake. Teenage parents are looking for more physical activities to participate in, such as swimming, outdoor activities, etc. This can be a more exciting way to engage teenage parents.
3. Young people and teenagers turn to the internet for information and assistance. Online tools can be an effective way to disseminate information and connect with young and teenage parents.
4. Tap into institutions or organisations that have first contact with pregnant teenagers or teenage parents, such as schools, hospitals, and GPs, to actively engage and inform the pregnant teenagers about available supports and services in Newham. Even better, use this opportunity to build a comprehensive service delivery network at the time of the first contact, so that the pregnant teenagers or teenage parents are connected and supported at the onset.
5. Work with existing programmes that already have established relationships with young people in the borough such as Connexions, youth clubs, and youth programmes to embed support services for pregnant teens and teen parents. These existing programmes and services have established trust with the young people, understand the context and culture, and can provide advice on making the support services more youth friendly. Provision of support services at these places will also make pregnant teens and teenage parents feel more welcome to participate.

b) Support from and for families

1. Emotional support for pregnant teenagers at the beginning stages of their pregnancy is important. Helping pregnant teens build an alternative support network before breaking the news to their family can be an alternative solution to those who potentially will be rejected by their family due to their pregnancy. Dedicated and specialist staff and organisations are needed to support pregnant teens in this way.
2. Building the capacity of families, friends, professionals and communities to support pregnant teenagers and teenage/young parents will reduce their further isolation and

enable them to plan for a better future. This again could be done through dedicated staff and organisations offering one-to-one support, IAG, as well as training course, written information e.g. pamphlets, and other forms of activities aimed at engaging and building capacity.

3. Meaningful relationships with family and friends will mean support for pregnant teenagers is sustained during pregnancy and after the birth of the baby. Therefore, supporting pregnant teenagers to build these meaningful relationships can have lasting impact for teenage parents. Better parenting and relationship courses and support from specialist organisations and staff could provide this.

c) Support from professionals

1. There should be a specific Teenage Parent Service in the borough, which
 - Informs and educates young people about the realities of young parenthood
 - Provides practical support for young teens who become pregnant parents
 - Acts as a central conduit for the range of professionals interacting with pregnant teenagers and young parents.
2. Mediation and conflict resolution support services to assist pregnant teenagers to break the news of their pregnancy to their families will help reduce instances of domestic abuse.
3. Build the capacity of healthcare professionals to work with teenage parents in a friendly and open-minded approach to ensure that teenage parents continue to approach healthcare professionals to assist in improving the health of their babies.
4. Assist pregnant teenagers with planning their future (education and career planning) at the beginning stages of their pregnancy, so that they can see their education and career path beyond their pregnancy and child-caring.
5. A comprehensive service delivery model/network for pregnant teenagers or teenage parents in Newham would be a more effective way of supporting them, which can allow professionals to come together and discuss their support from a client-centred approach.
6. Culturally sensitive services for the diverse demographics of Newham are important and this will encourage the diverse population of Newham take up the services offered.
7. Housing needs are a major concern for teenage parents in Newham. Many teenage parents suggested that the housing benefit system should provide auditors/inspectors to ensure the quality of the housing is up to a basic housing standard and to assist in advocating to landlords to provide housing conditions that meet the standard.
8. To reach those teenage parents who are not connected to the system, deliver direct outreach through informal community and faith based groups. In our experience, this

can be an effective way to connect with the diverse target audience in Newham and offer information on available services in a non-threatening way.

9. Teenage parents and pregnant teenagers have relied heavily on youth services such as Connexions to provide important advice and information, although many of these service providers do not provide dedicated services to teenage parents. To support the social and emotional needs of teenage parents, the borough needs to consider commissioning teen-parent specific support services.

Appendix One: Teen Parent Interview Questionnaire

Pregnancy Experience

When you first found out that you are pregnant:

1. When you first found out that you are pregnant, what are the things did you think about or worry about?
2. What was it like telling your family or friends that you are pregnant? How did they react to the news? Did your friend or family give you any support?
3. How did you deal with their reactions?

During Your Pregnancy:

1. Did you try getting support and services (like housing benefits, parenting support, etc.) during your pregnancy? *IF YES*: What did you try to get? What was your experience like getting the support and services? *IF NOT*: why not?
2. Did you get regular health care services during your pregnancy? If not, why not? Was your health care experience good or bad? Why good or why bad?
3. Did you go to antenatal classes or get information about having a baby? Where did you go? What was it like?
4. What did you worry about during your pregnancy?
5. What kind of support did you get from you families during your pregnancy? What about friends?

After giving birth:

1. What was it like having a baby to care for in the beginning? What about now?
2. What were some of the things that you needed help with?
3. Did you ask anyone for this help? Why or why not?
4. Did you see any changes in your family and friends since you had the baby? What was your relationship like with your family and friends now? What kind of support did you get from them?
5. What changes did you notice in yourself since you had the baby?
6. Is the baby's father in your life? What is your relationship with the baby's father like? What kind of support did you get from the father?
7. When do you think you would be ready to go back to work and/or education? (e.g. baby at X months old...etc)
8. Did you try getting information or support about going back to work or school? If yes, tell us about your experience. (e.g. Where did you get the information? Was the information or the support helpful? How was it helpful? If not helpful, how can it be improved?)

Supports

Family and Friends Supports

1. What kind of things did you wish your family and friends have helped you with when...
 - You first found out you are pregnant:
 - During your pregnancy:
 - After you have given birth:
2. Why do you think your friends or family were not able to provide those support?

Housing

1. Can you tell me about your experience in finding a suitable place to live?
2. Can you tell me about your housing situations and condition? Are you on housing benefits? (e.g. on your own, with parents, with partner, on housing benefits, AND/OR one-bedroom, two-bedroom, nice, not so nice...etc)
3. Can you tell me about your experience in dealing with your landlords?

Teen Parent Friendly Health Care Supports

1. Did you go to any family activity groups or places like mothers and toddlers group or Sure Start Centres? *If YES*, what was it like? *If NOT*, why not?
2. What do you do when worry about your baby's health?
3. Do you think about your own health? How do you take care of yourself and how do you get information about that?

Childcare

1. Do you know where you can get childcare information? Where did you look?
2. What childcare information are you looking for? (e.g. how to pay for, who to go to...etc.)
3. What are some of the challenges you face in arranging childcare?

Young Parents and Children Friendly Social Places

1. What would make you and your baby feel welcome in services or groups like the mothers and toddlers groups?
2. What kind of social activities would you like to do with your baby?
3. Where do you meet other young parents?

Appendix two: Professional Focus Group

Mapping the Social and Emotional Wellbeing Needs

Mapping out the journey of a teen parent from pregnant to having the baby to returning to work or employment.

Put up a long stretch of journey map (a line marked with three points of the major events: Finding out pregnancy, delivering the baby, ready to return to education or employment) with three periods, Antenatal/Pregnancy period, Caring for the baby.

1. From your experience of working with, supporting teen parents. What are some of the emotional and social experience of teen parents in their journey of pregnancy and mother/fatherhood? Worries, supports, thinking, etc.

Explore and debrief what people have put up.

Receiving Support

2. Where or from whom do teen parents in Newham typically get emotional and social supports in Newham?
3. Which supports are difficult to find in Newham?
4. What other support teen parents have come to ask you for?
5. Where can they get this support?
6. Emotional Support for Family and Friends? What kind of social and emotional support their friends and family need?

Culture Needs

7. In Newham we have a very diverse population, what are some of the cultural considerations for teen parents in their pregnancy journey? What do we NOT know about?

Contact

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About Community Links

Community Links is an innovative charity running community-based projects in east London. We have helped over 30,000 vulnerable children, young people and adults every year, with most of our 60 projects delivered in Newham, one of the poorest boroughs in Europe. We pioneer new ideas and ways of working locally and share the learning nationally with other practitioners, policymakers and the press.

Consultancy Services

Our consultancy services and approaches are grounded in over 30 years of delivering community-based projects in east London. We share our learning by providing practitioner-led research and evaluation, organisational development, community engagement, and bespoke skills training services.

Since 2003 we have worked with over 80 organisations across the UK, helping communities achieve their own potentials through capacity building, knowledge development, and community engagement. We share our expertise, experience, and network through a participatory skills-building approach so that we leave behind an enabled and self-sustaining community.

The Teenage Pregnancy Journey

“It was nerve wracking to tell my family but once I told them their reaction, of being shocked but still very happy, made me happy.”



NHS Newham's Health Improvement and Prevention Programme (HIPP) commissioned Community Links to research into Newham's teenage parents and young parents' social and emotional well-being needs and the related cultural issues amongst different demographic groups.

The project used a participatory action research methodology. A small group of teenage and young parents were recruited and trained as peer researchers to shape the research design, conduct 15 interviews and support the analysis and recommendation development.

Teen parents undertake a journey from discovering they are pregnant, the pregnancy itself, after the birth, returning to education and employment. This report examines the process and suggests some recommendations which were developed with the teen parent researchers, the teen parents we interviewed and local professionals

