

# Experiences of Pregnancy and Parenthood: Co-production with Teenage Parents in Scarborough

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## SUMMARY

Funded by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (IAA), this project aimed to investigate the relationship between growing up and living in Scarborough, teenage pregnancy and young parents' experiences of professional intervention in respect of their children. Using arts-based participatory methods, we held a series of workshops over a 10 month period of time. We also conducted 17 individual semi-structured interviews with young mums and dads aged between 17 and 23. As part of the project, we spoke with 15 professionals working in the area, including members of Scarborough's strategic Teenage Pregnancy Taskforce and practitioners more directly involved in supporting young parents. Young parents told us about the challenges of living and parenting in Scarborough in 2022/23 during the cost-of-living crisis, in a context of dramatic cuts to services intended to support young people. The fear of social services becoming involved in the lives of their children was found to have led to high levels of stress and anxiety for young parents, particularly during pregnancy, and mums and dads told us about their determination to prove themselves to be good mothers and fathers despite the negative and stigmatising reactions they had been subjected to. Young parents spoke about painful experiences of being subject to stigmatisation and discrimination relating to their age, both within the local community and in interactions with health and social care practitioners. As well as the many challenges of being a young parent in Scarborough in the current context, young mums and dads told us that their lives had been enriched by becoming parents and spoke about the many positive features of having their children early in life. We conclude by offering some recommendations for change, which are underpinned by the suggestions of young parents and professionals who took part in the project.

## INTRODUCTION

Previous research has found evidence of complex geographical clustering of social and economic deprivation in large seaside towns in the UK (Agarwal et. al., 2018; CMO, 2021; Wenham, 2020; 2022). Factors such as poor transport links, seasonal employment opportunities, transient populations, issues with drug and alcohol misuse and health inequalities contribute to popular understandings of rural coastal communities as having been "left behind" (Emmins et al., 2023; Wenham, 2020; 2022). High rates of teenage pregnancy in UK coastal towns have been found to exist alongside high rates of non-consensual social work intervention in children's lives; for example, research has identified that a child living in a deprived neighbourhood in Blackpool is more than 12 times more likely than a child living in Richmond to be the subject of a child protection plan or to be taken into care (Featherstone et. al., 2014). When the most recent statistics were published in 2020, North Yorkshire was found to have an under-18 conception rate of 10.9 per 1,000 population, compared with a national rate of 13.0 (Public Health England, 2020). Scarborough is the most deprived district in North Yorkshire (Data North Yorkshire, 2023), and was cited by public health managers who took part in this project as the area with the highest rate of teenage pregnancy and young parenthood in the county. There is evidence that significant variation in the rate of teenage pregnancy persist both between and within local areas (ONS, 2020), with particular concerns surrounding sexual activity and young parenthood in rural and seaside areas (Bell et al., 2004).

In this project, we aimed to understand more about the relationship between spatial inequalities and teenage parenthood, in a context of welfare retrenchment and unprecedented levels of compulsory social work intervention in children's lives (Bilson and Martin, 2017). We hoped to help build relationships between professionals involved in strategic planning and providing services for young parents in the town, facilitating increased opportunities for interdisciplinary working, planning for the establishment of a young parents' advisory group and laying a foundation for further research in this area. This short briefing document provides an overview of the findings of interviews with 11 of the young mums and 6 of the young dads who took part in this project, as well as findings from interviews with 15 professionals working locally within this field. We explore some of the key themes arising from interviews and conclude by offering some recommendations for policy and practice change in this area.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Living and parenting in Scarborough

Many of the young parents who took part in the project had lived in Scarborough their whole lives. While some spoke fondly of the local area, the overwhelming impression from interviews was that living and parenting as a young person in Scarborough in 2022/23 is challenging.

#### Dramatic cuts to service provision

**“There’s not a lot of support through the community...You’re not really informed about the support that there is, you’ve kind of got to stumble upon it”. (Rachel, young mum).**

**[Support for young parents] comes out as a huge gap in provision and it’s something we’re very conscious of.” (Professional 7).**

Service provision for young parents in Scarborough was found to have been significantly impacted by national cuts to public sector funding implemented since 2010. A “Young Parents Programme” (YPP) led by specialist Health Visitors and offering enhanced support to all young parents was introduced in North Yorkshire in 2016/17, following the decommissioning of the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) (Local Government Association, 2019). The YPP was the subject of an independent evaluation concluding in 2022, which found evidence of the programme’s impact on young parents across a range of measures (Vincent and Jopling, 2022), however the programme has since been decommissioned, with support for young parents being perceived to have been “stripped back to statutory requirements” (Professional 7). Pregnant teenagers in Scarborough currently receive the offer of universal midwifery and health visiting services, unless a particular need is felt to warrant referral to Children’s Services or other agencies.

Many of the professionals who took part in this project were concerned about the gap in provision left by the decommissioning of the YPP, with the move from individualised support to provision such as ‘group baby weigh-ins’ leading to missed opportunities to help more vulnerable parents. The fragmentation of funding arrangements in this area was also a concern for professionals, with Professional 7 explaining, “We have had...very similar programmes in the past, but they’re always...short-term, 2 or 3 years and then the funding stops and it all needs to be built up again from scratch”. Practitioners working directly with young parents described difficulties in finding information about support available in the local area, with Professional 1 commenting, “We’ve not actually managed to access anybody. Even if [support] is out there, it’s not easily accessible information.”

Similar to other research (Tarrant et al., 2020), young parents identified the lack of specific support for dad’s mental health as a key concern. James, a young father, expressed that “no one wants to help dads, only mums”, with Sam agreeing that “dads are pushed aside”. Difficulties for both mothers and fathers in accessing useful mental health support were also discussed, with the closure of youth groups and community spaces for young people emerging as key concerns. A need for more groups intended specifically for young parents was also identified, and the difficulties of travelling between the Eastfield estate and the town centre suggest a need for more support in local neighbourhoods. National cuts to public sector funding were having a direct impact on the lives of young parents, with professionals and young mums and dads alike expressing concerns about gaps in local service provision.



## Difficulties with housing, employment and finances

**“Money’s a big issue...sometimes worse than others, when you look in your bank and you go, ‘Oh, I’ve only got a pound, that’s it ‘till Monday and it’s only Thursday”. (James, young dad).**

**“Since Covid, everything’s been turned into Airbnb’s; so actually being a young parent you can’t get a start in life because all of the cheap flats that there were at one point have gone”. (Professional 1).**

Difficulties with housing, employment and finances emerged as key concerns for the young parents who took part in this project. Securing affordable housing was found to be a significant challenge, with some young families remembering the stress associated with sofa surfing and being housed in hotels and hostels during pregnancy and when caring for very young children. Escalating rental costs were acknowledged as making securing private sector accommodation extremely difficult, and landlords were often reported to be slow to respond to concerns about damp, mould and repairs. All of the 6 young fathers and 2 of the young mothers who took part in the project were in paid employment, but this was often seasonal, leading to financial difficulties in the winter months. It was common for young dads to discuss an increased pressure to provide financially for their family, and those aged under 17 were attempting to do this while working for a national minimum wage of £4.81 per hour and often taking available opportunities to work long hours where possible. It is important to place this within a broader context of a social security system which leaves young people more vulnerable to income poverty, with young people under the age of 25 (or in the case of housing, 35) receiving a lower benefit rate when compared to the older working age population (Wenham, 2021). Young parents (under 25) are exempt from being subject to the reduced under 35’s housing benefit rate, but then subject to the reduced under 25’s rate for Universal Credit (Gardiner and Rahman, 2019; Wenham, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Young parents spoke about “making do”, “sacrificing” and “managing”, with some families needing to access support such as food parcels during particularly difficult months. While financial help from family members was not typically available to the young people who took part in this project, some expressed a reluctance to accept offers of help which were made, with Sam, a young father commenting, “I’m not one to take money from people...I want to be able to do it myself. I’ve got myself into this situation, I should be able to get myself out of it”. Practitioners working directly with young parents also commented on the stigma associated with the receipt of financial or practical help, with Professional 12 remarking, “I keep saying about going to the Rainbow Centre for food bags and things like that, but they don’t ever want to go”. It was often difficult for young parents to provide their families with the housing and resources that they would have liked to, with welfare retrenchment and the national housing crisis impacting upon available opportunities. Young parents were demonstrating determination, creativity and resilience in meeting the needs of their families in an extremely challenging context.

<sup>1</sup> See recent campaign by “One Parent Families Scotland- <https://opfs.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/campaigns/end-the-young-parent-penalty/cross-party-letter/>

## Lack of affordable leisure opportunities, substance misuse and crime

**“It’s a holiday resort... but like if you live here...there’s nothing to do, absolutely nothing to do” (Sara, young mother).**

**“Even the town centre itself, it isn’t exactly a buzzing metropolis...It’s ok through the summer months, but when you come to out-of-season and the holidaymakers have gone, I guess it’s a bit of a ghost town with nothing to do”. (Professional 5).**

As highlighted by Sara above, while Scarborough becomes a vibrant town in the summer season, many young parents spoke of a lack of affordable activities to do with their children in the local area. Costly local facilities such as the Sealife centre and the Alpamare water park were found to be inaccessible for young parents, who were often struggling to make ends meet. Travelling by bus was also identified as unaffordable for many families. Young parents shared concerns about their personal safety in the town, perceiving an increase in crime and alcohol and drug misuse issues in recent years and making links between substance misuse, lack of affordable leisure opportunities and difficulties experienced by young people in accessing mental health support. While some young parents felt that the extent of crime in the town was exaggerated, others spoke of incidents such as stabbings, anti-social behaviour, car theft and arson in their local area, with young mothers in particular identifying areas in which they wouldn’t feel safe to walk alone, especially at night. Some parents were concerned about the impact of growing up around crime on their children, with Bethany remarking, “I’m scared [that my son] might grow into a teen and get coerced into drugs and stuff like that and I don’t want that for him...You see so much of it nowadays”. Lack of affordable leisure opportunities for locals and worries about crime and personal safety were found to be important concerns for the young parents who took part in this project.

## Experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination

**“People make comments all the time, and they always give you looks when your baby’s crying....If a baby’s crying with a young mum [people] are like, ‘Oh, she doesn’t know what she’s doing, kids having kids”. (Bethany, young mum).**

**“I think [stigma] is probably one of the hardest things for these young parents... [Parenthood] is a huge thing for them to have to adjust and adapt to, let alone with societal judgement on them”. (Professional 5).**

All of the young parents who took part in this research spoke extensively about experiences of being subjected to stigmatisation and discrimination relating to their age, both in the community and in interactions with health and social care professionals (See also Graham and McDermott, 2006; Hoggart, 2012; Wenham, 2016; Yardley, 2008). It was common for young parents to relate experiences of feeling judged by midwives or older parents when recovering in hospital after giving birth, with Aimee remembering, “Certain midwives make you...second-guess what you’re doing and some of them are quite judgemental....I had one who was telling me that I was too young and I should have waited and how I wouldn’t be able to manage...I didn’t really know what to say, ‘cos you don’t expect a health professional to say stuff like that”. Travelling on the bus, going to the doctors and being out and about with a bump or a pram in town all emerged as sites at which young parents were subjected to stigmatising comments or unsolicited advice. Mainstream mother and baby groups were also found to be challenging for young parents to attend, with Rachel, a young mother explaining, “There are playgroups and stuff, but they’re very tricky...You walk in and you instantly feel judged, so it’s not really somewhere you want to be”.

Practitioners identified a range of stigmatising perceptions about young parenthood which are prevalent in society and were aware of the detrimental impact that such ideas could have on young parents' confidence and self-esteem, with Professional 1 commenting, "We've had people who haven't gone out or taken their babies out since they were born". This resonated with one young father who stated, "You're not wanting to go out in public as much as you used to, because you're worried that people are looking at you, and staring at you, judging you..." and another young mother who also described the challenges of going out in public saying, "I won't go places on my own, because even if he starts crying in public I get scared that people look at me". However, while aware of the pervasive impact of stigmatisation on young parents' wellbeing, some professionals spoke uncritically about longstanding ideas relating to a "cycle of deprivation", with beliefs about families who have "never worked" and ideas about "history repeating itself" complicating professionals' accounts in some cases. Some practitioners identified Scarborough as an area in which teenage pregnancy is more widely accepted, with Professional 11 commenting, "I think [teenage pregnancy] is probably more widely accepted [in Scarborough] and probably doesn't have the stigma that it's associated with in other areas...I think it's probably cultural". The young parents who took part in this project all recounted numerous examples of experiencing stigmatisation in the community and in encounters with health and social care professionals and practitioners were aware of the damaging impact that this could have on young parents. It was common for practitioners to remark that they felt powerless to change the stigma associated with young parenthood in the contemporary context.

### Fear of social services involvement

**"[Social services] should be the people that you go to for support...but that's not how I felt at all. I felt very scared to turn to them, 'cos I didn't want [my son] getting taken off me 'cos of how young I was" (Rachel, young mum).**

**"I think there's a lot of fear in these young mums that social care will get involved and that they will have their babies taken away from them". (Professional 5).**

An important theme emerging from this project was the involvement of social services in the lives of young parents and the fear, stress and anxiety experienced in relation to this. There is evidence of a link between social services involvement and young parenthood; for example 16-19 year old young women who are in or leaving care are significantly more likely to become a teenage mother than those who have not spent time in care (Mezey et. al., 2017), and of mothers who lose children to adoption in England and Wales, young mothers aged between 16 and 19 are at highest risk of experiencing repeat losses of infants to care (Broadhurst et. al. 2015).

Of the 17 young parents who took part in this project, 8 had had some contact with Children's Services in relation to their children, ranging from one-off referrals resulting in no further action to pre-birth assessments and safeguarding enquiries. 2 of the young parents were themselves care leavers and it was common for participants to have some experience of statutory involvement in their own childhood, or to have close friends or family members who had this experience. Young parents often described feeling targeted for referral to social care by health care professionals due to their age in a way which they felt older parents wouldn't have been, with Stacey commenting, "I guarantee, if I was 30, in my 30's, in my 20's, I don't think that it would have been the same" and Bethany stating, "Social[Workers] look more for the young parents 'cos they think they're incapable...They might come for me just 'cos I'm young". Histories of social care involvement could also be understood as contributing to a sense of fear, with enquiries made by social workers emerging as a frightening threat impacting on family life, particularly during pregnancy. Sara, for example, grew up in care and remembered, "I didn't want to speak about getting baby names, I didn't want to go out buying stuff ...If I get my hopes up and my baby's taken...that is gonna destroy me". Fear of statutory involvement was also found to have impacted upon young parents' engagement with other services, with young mums in particular reporting that they had delayed or avoided seeking help for issues such as postnatal depression and homelessness as they perceived that this may result in a social care referral.

While many young parents spoke positively about help offered by practitioners such as youth workers, hostel staff, leaving care workers and some midwives, experiences of social work involvement were described in exclusively negative terms, with issues such as frequent changes of worker and a focus on paperwork understood as impacting upon relationships between young parents and social workers. The focus on children's needs necessitated by the Children Act (1989) was also experienced as exclusionary by some young parents, with James, a young dad remarking, "It's just them checking the child...they don't care about the parents". The feeling of being under scrutiny or subject to surveillance also emerged as important, with young parents describing experiences of having their kitchen cupboards checked to ensure that there were adequate amounts of food available. Young parents told stories of resistance to feelings of judgement and scrutiny, with Sara remarking, "I was up all hours of the night, reading into absolutely everything...I was thinking, 'I'm not having them come here, say all of this to me and I be absolutely clueless about what's going on". None of the young parents who took part in the project had ongoing social work involvement in the lives of their children, and the decision that no further involvement would be required was described as a huge relief for families.

Practitioners working directly with young parents were aware of the sense of fear which young parents felt about the involvement of social services, identifying this as a stressor throughout pregnancy and postpartum and citing examples of parents who had initially been reluctant to accept their support for fear that other agencies were "spying for social services" (Professional 1). Stories of child removal being circulated on social media were identified as perpetuating the problem. Practitioners cited examples of young parents they had worked with not being taken seriously by healthcare workers and identified that antenatal care could be stressful for young parents, with messages about the importance of smoking cessation emphasising the sense of judgement and alienation they experienced. Where social workers were involved with families, practitioners identified that complex terminology could sometimes be alienating for young parents and highlighted the need for independent advocacy support in meetings with social care. It was highlighted by some workers that third-sector agencies were not always taken seriously by statutory services, which was acting as a barrier to effective information-sharing in some cases. Professional 12 perceived that young parents are "under the microscope" in a way in which they wouldn't have been historically. Interestingly, practitioners had also supported young parents who had been subjected to threats made by other young people to contact social services in relation to their children, with the involvement of social services being weaponised among groups of young people. The fear of social workers becoming involved in the life of their child emerged as a key concern for young parents who took part in this project, with professionals having witnessed first-hand the stress and anxiety about social care involvement among young parents.

### The positive features of young parenthood

**"I look at [my daughter] and instantly it's like my heart wants to explode...I don't specifically know what it is that makes it so amazing. It's everything...it's worth it". (Stacey, young mum).**

**"For some people [teenage pregnancy] is not the right thing for them, but for some it can be the making of them, and I think we need to recognise that and make sure that that is front and centre of our work". (Professional 4).**

Despite the many challenges associated with young parenthood, the mums and dads who took part in this research spoke of becoming a parent as a transformative event which had improved the quality of their lives, expressing unconditional love for and commitment to their children. Some parents identified that parenthood had given them the motivation to make positive changes in their lives and spoke of a sense of increased maturity and energy, with Sam explaining, ““You get to grow up with your child...you get to have that adventure with them” and Keeley stating “I get to bring him up in an environment where I grow as much as he grows and we learn together new experiences”. Being a “good” mother or father emerged as being important to young parents, with qualities such as emotional availability, prioritising their child’s needs, providing financially for children and supporting their child’s other parent all being recognised as important. Young parents were also able to resist societal pressure for perfection, aspiring to “do [their] best” and holding thoughtful perceptions of what it means to be a good parent, with Katie explaining “As long as your baby’s happy, that’s a good and successful mum”.

While public health policies surrounding teenage pregnancy relate primarily to prevention (Public Health England, 2018), professionals who took part in interviews emphasised the importance of choice, acknowledging that for some young people, young parenthood can be positive. Professionals spoke about the need for a change in the narratives surrounding teenage pregnancy, identifying that early support and specialist services for young parents can contribute to improved outcomes for both parents and children. Professional 10 explained, “There is just this natural assumption that there’s some perfect age for...getting pregnant and raising a child, and it’s certainly not someone who’s 18 or 19..We just make that like it’s a statement, rather than something that needs to be explored more”. It was acknowledged that young parenthood can co-exist alongside the exploration of other opportunities, with Professional 4 commenting, “It’s...perceived that if you get pregnant, your life’s over...[We need] recognition that...you can be a parent, you can have a life too, you can get a career, you can be a stay-at-home parent if that’s what you want...I think us as professionals and the wider health system need to respect young people’s choice and not apply our bias’, wherever they might come from”. Young parents and professionals were able to identify the positive aspects of young parenthood, emphasising a need for informed choice and access to adequate opportunities and support in improving outcomes.



## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings outlined in this short briefing document lead us to make the following recommendations for change in adequately supporting young parents in deprived communities, many of which are underpinned by the suggestions of mums, dads and professionals themselves.

- Peer support groups were highly valued among young parents and there is a need for more local community groups and services who can provide non-threatening support to young parents and their children. Considering the 'cost of living crisis' and the increased risk of income poverty amongst young parents, there is a role for local councils in providing discounted access to local leisure facilities to young parents and their children. This needs to be part of a wider agenda for change that focuses on providing better support for children and families on a low income, especially regarding necessary changes to the social security system.
- This research identified a pervasive fear of social work involvement among young parents. At a time when social work intervention is at record levels nationally, work needs to be done to improve vulnerable populations' relationships with statutory agencies. Key to this will be having open and meaningful conversations with young parents so that professionals can better understand their support needs and barriers to accessing provision. We recommend the formulation of a 'Young Parents Advisory Board' so that young parents are included and consulted at all stages of service development and design. This board could also play an integral role in the education and training of professionals who work with young parents more broadly. Considering the main themes from this study, there are opportunities for training on engaging young parents during pregnancy and in hospital post-birth, supporting young parents to understand potential reasons for social care involvement and supporting young parents in accessing non-stigmatising mental health support. This needs to be part of a broader range of training or workshops which develop and strengthen young parent inclusive practice.
- Young parents identified a gap in provision for young fathers in accessing useful help after becoming a dad, linking this with the difficulties experienced by some men in talking about their mental health. Further planning, investment and research is needed in this area.
- Young parents and the professionals supporting them need to be able to access timely information about local support services and the help that they might be entitled to. Young parents suggested a leaflet which could be provided in maternity services. The idea of opt-in additional Health Visitor support was also suggested.
- Lack of affordable childcare was acknowledged by parents and professionals as a barrier to young mothers returning to education or employment and needs to be addressed in order to improve access to opportunities for parents and their children. Young parents and their children also need to have access to appropriate accommodation, financial resources and advocacy in order for their needs to be meaningfully addressed.
- There is a need for leadership and a coherent national strategy in planning policy and services for young parents, with recognition that young parenthood can be an active choice which needs to be planned for and supported. Ring-fenced funding to support young parents should be provided in this time of stretched resources, with recognition of the limitations imposed by siloed and time-limited pots of funding.

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**School for Business  
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**For more information on the project, please see:**  
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