

HOW EFFECTIVELY DOES THE  
YOUTH SERVICE RESPOND  
TO THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PARENTS LIVING  
IN RURAL WALES?

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## Abstract

This paper will consider how effectively the Youth Service responds to the needs of young parents living in rural Wales. Policies on preventing unwanted teenage pregnancy are currently high on the agenda and reducing rates of teenage conception is one of the key priorities for public health outlined in The Welsh Government Sexual Health and Wellbeing Action Plan (WAG, 2011) However, few studies have considered the specific needs of young parents and especially for those who are living in rural and often isolated areas of Wales.

### Aims

The main aim of this study will look to demonstrate that through engaging in Youth Work activities young parents will receive the support they need to make a successful transition to adulthood.

### Method

The methodology used to gather data is through a participatory research project. The young parents are directly involved in the study and have carried out a focus group and interviews to gain evidence needed for the study.

### Results

The results recorded are taken directly from the qualitative research evidence gathered. The findings have been transcribed by the author and have been explored in depth in chapter 5 of the paper.

### Conclusion

The conclusion will demonstrate that the Youth Service makes an invaluable contribution to the lives of many young people and has the potential to effectively respond to the needs young parents.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to recognise the effectiveness of the Youth Service in meeting the needs of young parents living in rural areas of Wales.

The relationship between early parenthood and the idea of 'cost'—moral, social and economic, has long been of public and Government concern (Duncan *et al* 2010). Interventions to reduce teenage conceptions are notoriously high on the agenda of policy makers including the Welsh Government, who recently announced a new five year plan to improve sexual health services and reduce teenage pregnancies (WAG, 2010).

In recent year's emphasis has been placed on the importance of prevention education, with Government Ministers introducing a new Personal and Social Educational framework delivered by schools and colleges. (WAG, 2010) Despite Policy makers' recognising that teenage pregnancy is a complex issue that requires an integrated response (WAG, 2010), once again, strong emphasis has been placed on the notion that formal education is the best approach in solving this issue.

Despite wide spread literature being available with regards to teenage pregnancy intervention, very little research has been carried out on the needs on young parents and especially those living in rural areas of Wales. What research has been carried out has focused on young parent's being victims of ignorance with predicted poor outcomes for both parent and child (Hughes, 2010). Despite there being evidence to support the relationship between being a young parent and social exclusion (Harden

A *et al*, 2006) very limited studies have provided an insight to the actual voiced needs of the young parents themselves.

Although the clarity of purpose and associated principles and values of Youth Work are identified in a number of policy documents which include the National Youth Service Strategy for Wales (WAG 2007), the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work (LLUK 2008) and the Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales (SCYWW 2007), these are often subject to distortion (Rose, 2012). This is often due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the core aims of Youth Work, which is to support the personal and social development of young people through non - formal education and informal learning. This is significant in making this service unique. Youth Workers continuously look for opportunities in which they can provide young people with the opportunity to gain skills and expand their knowledge. The Youth Service acknowledges that it is an educational service however; the education it delivers is provided in two distinct ways

Non – formal educational opportunities take place outside the formal learning context however, they are still structured in terms of learning outcomes, it responds to the educational needs of the person. The learning is intentional from both the learner’s point of view as well as the facilitator.

Informal Learning - is a natural accompaniment to everyday life. Although learning may be unintentional by the participant and out side of the formal and non- formal context, the young people will acquire additional skills, knowledge and competences. This unique approach and distinctive way of working must be highlighted as an effective way to meet the needs of young parents and therefore, prompted the author to write this paper.

The purpose of this investigation is to identify how effectively Youth Work can enable positive outcomes for young parents and how as a result it can play a central role in achieving the Welsh Government's aspirations for all young people. To achieve this, the investigation will first carry out a comprehensive literature review to identify what has been written about the subject and to identify gaps in the research that need to be expanded upon (Hart, 2001). The literature review will focus on the three main elements of the question which are;

1. Specific needs of young parents,
2. Characteristics of rural Wales and implications for young parents
3. Role and purpose of the youth service.

The focus of the second chapter will be to identify the methodology most appropriate to obtain reliable and valid evidence in answering the research question. This will be done by conducting a participatory research project, decided upon as its ethos meets the philosophy of Youth Work with its fundamental approach of offering all young people the right to participate in making decisions, planning and reviewing actions which concern them (WAG, 2007).

As the researcher works in the field of Youth and Community practice, the tools used to gather information are appropriate to her own work with young parents. Focus groups with young parents attached to the Youth Service will seek to demonstrate how, by directly involving the young parents in the research process, a more thorough and integral understanding of young parents' needs can be identified. Interviewing Youth Workers will seek to establish their opinions on the impact informal learning opportunities have on the personal and social development of young parents. Interviewing young parents who are not attached to the Youth Service will not only gain valuable insight into to the current needs of young parents

in rural Wales but will also provide a triangulated approach to obtaining evidence of use to the study. The use of interviews also looks to demonstrate the importance Youth Work places on listening to and valuing young people's opinions, thoughts and ideas and how the young parent's themselves can contribute to developing the literature on this topic. By focusing on the needs of the young parents living in rural areas of Wales, the evidence gathered attempts to not only highlight significant gaps in past research but particularly the lack of evidence with regards young parents living in rural areas. This evidence will not only inform the Youth Service but will look to enlighten policy makers and other services working with young parents.

A systematic review is a specialist review technique which employs standardised and explicit methods (Cooper and Hedges, 1994; Egger *et al.*, 2001). The systematic review of the findings from the research will be employed to limit the risk of drawing the wrong or misleading conclusion from the evidence gathered. Therefore, the evidence gathered in Chapter 4 will be displayed following the transcribing of the exact words and comments resulting from the focus group and interviews with all participants. A discussion of the findings will then draw meaning and interpretation of the data, this will be analysed and these findings will be related and compared to the policy and literature surrounding past research on the needs of young parents.

The final chapter of the paper will seek to answer the question, it will acknowledge that despite the negativity surrounding early entry into parenthood, young parent's themselves do not lack aspiration or motivation. However, they do have specific needs, especially those who are not only isolated due to their circumstances but also due to their rural locality. These needs differ from other parents and yet other agencies and services tend to neglect or overlook this fact. Through research



conducted, as well as recognising the true and fundamental philosophy of Youth Work the paper will demonstrate that the effectiveness of the Youth Service achieving positive outcomes for young people should not be under estimated.

## 2. Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review will be to focus on three main elements of the question.

- Specific needs of young parents
- Characteristics of rural Wales and implications for young parents.
- Role and purpose of the youth service

The review will identify research that has been carried out, assist in recognising difficulties and drawbacks of various studies and will also highlight the areas of research that needs to be expanded upon (Hart, 2001). Resources used for this literature review are books, journals, articles, reports, vital internet websites and official publications.

The literature reviewed relates to Wales or the UK as a whole unless otherwise stated. Literature on the Youth Service Policies are taken from Welsh Assembly Government Documents and was viewed as part of the evidence gathered to inform this study.

### Back ground research on young parents

Some of these teenagers, and some of their children, live happy and fulfilled lives. But far too many do not. Teenage mothers are less likely to finish their education, less likely to find a good job, and more likely to end up both as single parents and bringing up their children in poverty. The children themselves run a much greater risk of poor health, and have a much higher chance of becoming teenage mothers themselves. Our failure to tackle this problem has cost the teenagers, their children and the country dear.

(SEU, 1999, 4)

2010 marked the year by which New Labour pledged to halve the number of pregnancies for under-eighteen year-olds in the UK. The government's ten year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was launched in 1999 in a report from the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, 1999), which saw teenage pregnancy as a major social and economic problem, where Britain did much worse in terms of number of teenage pregnancies than other West European countries (SEU 1999). The report identified problems associated with teenage pregnancies explaining that many young mothers had low aspirations, lack of knowledge on relationships and sexual health and highlighted a strong relationship between teenage pregnancy and social disadvantage. Although, the report recognised that there had been a steady decline in teenage conceptions and births since 1999 (Asmussen & Weizel, 2010:2), it stressed that the extreme disadvantage experienced by many young parents and their children has forced the government to adopt an urgent stance in improving the wellbeing and opportunities for young parents.

In 2010 a research report by the National Academy for Parenting stated that young parents were amongst the most vulnerable members of the population and that teenage parenthood also poses the risk to young women of links between motherhood and poor mental health, higher levels of domestic violence and a greater likelihood of social exclusion (Asmussen & Weizel, 2010: 5). Although the report also recognised that there was a decline in teenage pregnancy it stipulated that statistics had shown that 27 out of 1000 teenage women aged 15 – 19 would give birth in 2010. 20% of these births would be to young mothers who already have at least one other child (DfES 2006) with an increased chance that their own children would become teenage parents themselves. A study by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER, 2003) also provided evidence that family background and

childhood factors are associated with having a child as a teenager, stating that the age of the mother at the time birth and the mother's education as well as family social class will have strong implications; showing those born to teenage mothers are twice as likely to become teenage mothers themselves (ISER, 2003:16). In further studies it is also suggested that young parent's, especially teenage mothers are much less likely to be a homeowner later in life, and living standards, as measured by equivalent household income, is about 20% lower. The probability of being 'poor' (in the bottom quartile of the equivalent income distribution) is also much higher (Ermisch, 2003:15).

The evidence so far has suggested that there is considerable concern that having a child as a teenager, or more generally, earlier in life, may have longer-term consequences for the mother in terms of her earnings and standard of living, as well as negative consequences for the children living with her. Evidence also indicates that not only is a young parent perceived as being vulnerable, experiencing lack opportunity and at risk of social exclusion but also implies that there is an intergenerational cycle in the accumulation of disadvantage (Hawkes, 2011:2). An important issue identified during the review of the literature is related to the limited evidence related to the needs of young single fathers. Reasons for this are suggested by Jones, (2002) who argues firstly, that there is little known about the role of young single fathers and that while the general pattern is for births outside marriage to be registered by both parents, among young parents it is more often the mothers alone. Following her research into young fatherhood she concluded that fathers who wanted to be involved with their children found they were made to feel unimportant both during the pregnancy and after the birth and secondly that young men's attitudes to fatherhood were found to be complex. Drawing on the work of Tabberer (2002) she considered that while many young men recognised the financial

responsibility of the child their social lives still revolved around same sex peers, preferring to go to clubs and pubs at the weekend and placed the responsibility of parenthood in the hands of the mother.

Another significant finding from the literature review was that policy and government consider that most pregnancies are a mistake and that due to a lack of education on sex and relationships as well as their age their parenting abilities their future prospects are unredeemable from the start (Kiselia, 2008). Research carried out in 2006, on the views and experiences of men and women who became parents while under the age of twenty, again highlighted that most studies have focused on young mothers and their children and there has been very little research concerning the experiences of young fathers. Researchers have also pointed out that norms concerning the timing of parenthood have varied, historically and culturally: parents aged under twenty have not always been seen as a 'problem' group, and are not seen in this way in all communities (Hirst *et al* 2006:10). Coleman and Cater (2006) also echo this notion that starting a family whilst being a young offered many a turning point in their lives, concluding that young people saw becoming a parent as en route to adulthood. Studies by Hoggart (2006) and McDermott and Graham (2005) demonstrate that there were explicit references to taking advantage of the 'turning point' offered by pregnancy, in terms of planning for the future: forming a strong family unit for example, or making renewed efforts to gain qualifications. Duncan *et al* (2010) in their research on becoming a young parent, strongly argue that age at which pregnancy occurs seems to have little effect on future social outcomes (like employment and income in later life), or on current levels of disadvantage for either parents or their children.

Despite the arguments to whether there are positive or negative results of becoming a young parent we must acknowledge the evidence that there are specific differences in the needs of those who are in a stable relationship, with family support and have an economically secure future, compared to the many young people who find themselves in a position of bringing a child into the world when they are still at an important transition period in their lives themselves.

### **Rural Areas**

The term 'rural' is a concept that is easily understood at a common-sense level, yet difficult if not impossible to define (Anderson, 1999). In much of literature, rural areas have been defined in terms of the population size and/or density of an area. However, it has been suggested that the demography of an area represents just one of four dimensions of the meaning of rurality with the other three being economical, social structural and cultural (Weisheit Falcone & Wells, 1996). For the purpose of this research rural areas of Wales will include the size and population density as well as economical and social structural.

The stereotype of rural life as being "idyllic" can be misleading as many families, particularly those on low income, find it very difficult to access services and support which would make it easier for them to raise their family. This is exemplified by a report by Children in Wales (2008) which stresses that rural policy in Wales tends to be associated with agriculture and resources and policy directed at the support of family and community in rural areas is limited. The report also highlights the services provided for parents in rural areas are inconsistent, accessing leisure opportunities and welfare advice are also described as irregular and for many young parents problems were exacerbated by the lack of affordable transport and living in low-

income households. Despite The Welsh Assembly Government Parenting Action Plan, published in December 2005, which sets out its proposals to support mothers, fathers and carers with raising their children, Roache (2006) argues that with a lack of research on young parents in rural areas it is still difficult to identify their particular needs. Geraghty et al (1997: iv) have also indicated that the specific needs of young people in rural areas are largely neglected. Through their research on community relations their report has evidenced that that rural areas have suffered differentially from policy decisions and commitments in terms of equality of opportunity.

A review of existing literature concludes that that the transition to adulthood is more difficult and complicated than in the past. This is especially true for young people growing up in rural areas where structural decline in employment in agriculture and other traditional land-based industries have altered the employment routes which many young people would have chosen. A greater responsibility is increasingly placed on young people to create their own pathways in an uncertain world. As Shucksmith (2010) suggests, many of the old certainties are ebbing away and that young people in rural areas live increasingly in a 'risk society', dependent less on traditional institutions such as the family and church but instead on labour markets and the welfare state. For young people to access further education or employment the lack of available transport and the cost of transport are often seen as a potential barrier limiting their chances of higher educational attainment and career opportunities. Although it may be argued youth unemployment in rural areas is often believed to be caused by the low aspirations of young people themselves, their families and local communities. However as Spielhofer *et al* (2011) argues that individual personal goals and ambitions should not be seen in isolation from the social and personal context in which they are formed. For young people living in rural

areas their aspirations are often shaped by the realistic opportunities available to them. Research by Nfer (2006) found that limited employment choices in rural areas are a significant factor that young people feel influences their aspirations. The influence of families and friends on young people's aspirations and decisions is also widely acknowledged and research suggest that in rural areas this influence may be even greater because young people have less access to wider influences as they tend to be located in small communities. Again Spielhofer *et al* (2011) state that young people living in rural areas have smaller social groups and influences, and therefore may have less awareness of the potential options they could pursue. The theme of low aspirations for young people living in rural areas and more specifically young parents is identified by McNulty (2001). In her research she looks at three generations of related young mothers and challenges ideas about intergenerational transmission of low aspirations, and shows how each generation of young mothers in a family wanted to achieve, and wanted their daughters to achieve, in education and employment. However, it was lack of opportunities in their locality that shaped their decisions to start a family. Lupton and Kneale (2010) draw on further research to determine whether there is good reason to believe that neighbourhood and wider area influences might be associated with an early planned, or anticipated pregnancy and with the opportunity to engage in risky sexual behaviour leading to unplanned pregnancy. Their findings show that whilst teenage parenthood is fairly common across the social spectrum of the UK, teenage and early parenthood tends to be associated with a range of disadvantageous background, socioeconomic and educational characteristics. A study carried out by Craig (2004) that looked at the connection between teenage pregnancy in seaside and rural areas found a number of factors that which operated as common indicators to early sexual activity and



unprotected sex in both of these communities. These include gender roles and rules, sexual and emotional illiteracy, alcohol and social exclusion. When these factors combine with the seaside 'carnival' or the difficulties in accessing services in rural areas, the negative consequences for young people, in terms of unplanned conception, parenting and/or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) appeared to increase (Craig, 2004: 4). In addition to this their data also suggested that the environment in which many young people are growing up in, for example holiday resorts, was conducive to an alcohol and casual sex culture. In certain seaside areas they found that a number of proprietors of leisure-related outlets made alcohol freely available to young people, in order to make their businesses more competitive. Young people in these rural / seaside areas were often seen purely as consumers with money and were treated as means for profit. This they found was tolerated in anonymous rural localities, especially as in these areas businesses struggled to survive.

To summarise, despite there being evidence that has shown that locality, lack of opportunity and community influence are factors in shaping the future for many young people, young parents living in rural communities do have specific needs in comparison to their urban peers. Lack of access to services, limited childcare provisions and employment opportunities due to high transport costs all play a significant factor in young parent's social and emotional wellbeing. However, a noticeable strand running through the majority of literature research was the definite lack of voices and the actual lived experiences of young parents living in rural areas. Much of the literature reviewed and policy points to the broader social and economic context within which young parenting becomes seen as a problem. This is suggesting that it is the socio – economic status not the age that is the real issue at

stake in Government policy. However, the very definite needs of those young parents are often over looked along with a gap in research on the actual feelings of the young parents. Whether they encounter difficulties with other professionals, how they are treated within their communities and whether being a young parent has an affect on the young persons self esteem, confidence and self resilience

### **The Role and Purpose of the Youth Service**

In order to gain a better understanding of how the Youth Service responds to the needs of young parents living in rural Wales it is vital that we consider the role and purpose of the Youth Service in Wales today. We must determine how its work differs from those of other services working with young people and whether it is possible to measure and evaluate how effectively we are responding to specific needs of young parents.

Despite the clarity of purpose and associated principles and values identified in a number of policy documents including the National Youth Service Strategy for Wales (WAG, 2007), the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work (LLUK, 2008) and the Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales (SCYWW 2007) Youth Work practice and the identification of the outcomes for young people as a result of their involvement in Youth Work activities has always been a matter of some debate (Davies, 2010:1). However, although we have witnessed over the past seven decades the service evolving, responding to changing economic and social conditions, we have recognised how terminology has altered and emphasis of its core features along with new focus and priority have directed the service in many different directions and yet the underpinning philosophy of the Youth Service, which are embedded in the practice from it's earliest days remain distinct.

### **Voluntary Principle**

The Youth Service looks to provide a distinctive approach and response to working with young people (Davies, 2010). The voluntary principle delineates it from all most all other services (Jeffer, 2001:56) where young people are able to enter into relationships with Youth Workers and terminate this relationship when they wish to do so. This unique characteristic allows for the Youth Service to respond to the needs of young parents and yet allows them to generate their own form of support and association (Jeffer & Smith 2010:2). Unlike many other professions who young parents are obliged to see during not only their pregnancy but also after the birth of their child, the Youth Service offers young parents the opportunity to exercise their own judgement and empowers them to make their own decisions with regards to themselves and their child/ children.

Youth Work is committed to equal opportunity, offering the chance for all young people to be partners in their own learning and decision making, whilst also helping them to develop their own set of values. It starts where young people are in their lives and creates favourable circumstances for learning pathways. Although the National Youth Work Strategy for Wales (WAG, 2007) sets out its vision of delivering a universal service for all 11 to 25 year olds in Wales, in more recent years we have witnessed shifts in age ranges as well as looking to specifically target groups such as young people classed as NEET (Not in education, training or employment) or those who may potentially drop out of mainstream education; these along with young parents are seen as groups of young people who are as Smith (2002) states, as being in deficit and in need of training and control.

. Despite the changing emphasis of work with young people Youth Work continues to recognize the importance of group association. Research has demonstrated how a sense of belonging, cooperation and shared life experiences is potentially more

empowering than aiding young people simply to feel good about themselves (Jolly, 2010:10). It has already been noted that young people, at this stage in their lives, often like to gather in social groups, whether it is on the streets or at a bus shelter. Part of their development is this freedom to organize their own activities, decide on their identity and gain the feeling of belonging. As Patton (2010) states within these formal groups' members have conscious, significant, decision making power over the affairs of the group. Research has proven that as a consequence of the decline social cohesion and a rise in individualistic orientation there has been a rise in teenage depression and the general feeling of unhappiness (Lane, 2000, Layard, 2005: UNICEF 2007). This is particularly poignant for young parents who often feel marginalized by society and a lack of connection with peers who are not in similar circumstances. Therefore, despite increased focus on work with individuals (Patton, 2010:114) Youth Work continues to recognize that the educative power of group association and the beneficial affect it has on young parent's emotional wellbeing.

Youth Work unlike many professions working with young people recognise the importance of balancing authority, friendship and accessibility in order to engage with young people and promote learning (Blacker, 2010:18). As Friel & Bretton (2012) states young parents are often anxious about engaging with Youth Services or agencies due to lack of confidence or fear of being seen as unable to cope. Therefore, development of a trusting relationship is paramount in responding to their needs.

As relationships are central to Youth Work practice we recognise that the nature and quality of relationships will impact on the quality of young people's experiences. Although it is often impossible to measure in terms of effectiveness and outcomes how the relationship with young people is assisting in their development, we do however, recognise that although we are not consciously educating young people at all times, by

building a trusting relationships we are offering the young person the opportunity to feel valued and safe in the knowledge that they are not being judged Through this approach we recognise that learning which as described by (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm 2002) is a 'social and relational process which is shaped by the social context in which it occurs,' is therefore, more likely to take place.

By offering them the chance to participate in activities, build relationships and discover their own potentials, Youth Work maximises informal learning. Youth Workers also recognise that by delivering a wide range of non - formal educational opportunities it empowers young people to pursue their rights and responsibilities as active citizens and enables them to use this learning progress to grow socially and emotionally enhancing their own future outcomes (WAG, 2007).

On revisiting the introduction of this literature review consideration has been given to the needs of young parents in general. However, although there are gaps in research specifically on young parents in rural areas it is possible to identify certain issues that are prevalent to this group of young people. Through past and current research on the role and purpose of the Youth Service, it has been identified that the Youth Service remains distinctive in its approach and its understanding of young people and how to respond to the many issues they may experience during this transitional period in their lives .However, the focus of this paper looks to consider firstly how effectively we are responding to the distinctive needs of young parents and whether this is possible to measure and evaluate whether we are succeeding in our efforts to make a difference to these young peoples' lives . To do this the next chapter of this paper will look at the method and methodology that will be used to conduct a research on the views of the young parents and Youth Workers to

establish the effectiveness of Youth Services response to young parents needs in rural areas of Carmarthenshire.

### 3. Methodology

The question to be answered by this research is how effectively the Youth Service responds to the needs of young parents living in rural Wales. It is the intention of this chapter to identify how this question will be answered in a reliable, valid and generalised way.

The main focus of this study will look to demonstrate that through engaging in Youth Work activities young parents will receive the support they need to make a successful transition to adulthood. By looking closely at the needs of those young parents living in rural areas the research will identify how both informal learning opportunities and non-formal educational activities have and can create improved outcomes for the young parents and their children. It will also investigate whether the Youth Service can tailor the support they provide so that it meets the needs of young parents' more effectively.

#### Background

The background to the research is linked to the widespread policy concern that there are unacceptably high levels of unintended teenage pregnancies in the UK. (Harden, *et al*, 2006). Being a young parent is not in itself a social problem. However, as Dickson (1997) argues, teenage or early parenthood is more likely to be associated with adverse social and health outcomes than pregnancies at a later stage in life. Although this paper recognises that some young people make a positive choice about becoming a parent earlier, the fact that the young people are still going through important cognitive, social and emotional changes in their own lives can not be overlooked. As young parents, they may struggle to establish independence and self-reliance and a feeling of worth in society; where as young people they cling to

connections with peers and often return to their 'role' as child within the family. These typical yet conflicting developmental needs of the young parents impact on their transition from childhood to adulthood.

From a Youth Work perspective we recognise that the role and purpose of the service we provide is to offer all young people the opportunity to participate in a range of activities and experiences which help them make positive and constructive choices, gain skills and emotional competence, and learn from their experiences (WAG, 2007). Therefore, it is important that we recognize and understand the both the voiced and unvoiced needs of the young parents we come into contact with and how as a service we can contribute positively to their social and emotional development, especially as young people who have the additional responsibility of caring for a child/ children.

Through reviewing current and past literature and studies it has been acknowledged that much research has been carried out on young parents in general. However, although their contribution to this paper is positively acknowledged it has also indentified a number of gaps in research. In relation to teenage pregnancy emphasis has been placed on the effectiveness of pregnancy prevention programmes and the perceived social threat of teenage parents (Duncan et al, 2010:17). However, whilst this paper recognises the many challenges young parents may experience, as well as the unique needs of this group of young people, this research looks to focus on areas that have perhaps in the past been neglected and more importantly look to give voice to the young parents, and let their views shape the way we respond to their needs.



Having recognised the undoubted needs of most young parents this research will concentrate on those specifically living in rural areas of Carmarthenshire, West Wales. It will seek to explore whether their unique needs are being met and how effectively the Youth Service is responding to these needs. The research will seek to answer two questions:

- What are the specific needs of young parents living in rural areas of Carmarthenshire?
- How effectively does the Youth Service respond to these needs?

### Research Consideration

For the purpose of this study it is vital to look closely at factors such as how much time is available, to both the researcher and to the young parents, the word count of the paper, the researcher's skills in this field, rules and regulations such as obtaining Ethical Approval along with the researchers own preference (Blaxter *et al*, 2006). In this research paper the author acknowledged that as a third year student conducting the research time was a specific issue, being a full time Youth Worker along with having a family of her own the scale of the project needed to be thought through thoroughly before attempting to plan anything. 12, 000 words were available for the whole project which suggested that the study must have a depth in order for data to be analysed and discussed in detail.

## Ethics

Ethical approval was not a major factor to contend with, however as expressed by Laws (2000) that there are some underlying principles that should inform all work with young people and that ethical considerations should appear at all levels of research. Therefore research ethics was discussed with all the young parents who were involved with project prior to it commencing and the purpose and design of the research was understood by all. In this instance Ethics Approval (Appendix 1) was sought from the university Ethics Panel and was agreed on the information provided (Appendix 2). All of the young parents involved with the project were eighteen or over therefore parental consent forms were not needed. Although we did not expect any of the young parents to experience any distress during the study it was agreed that the data collection of an individual would stop immediately was this to occur. Confidentiality issues were mentioned in the Ethics Approval Application: therefore, names or initial the names or initials recorded on the data collection tools, to allow the researcher to match data, would be locked in a secure place until the research had been completed and then they would be deleted.

The issues raised above have demonstrated that the risks and inconvenience have been kept to a minimum in order to ensure that the Ethic Panel approved the application and that involvement in the study is made straightforward and uncomplicated for all the participants.

## Design of the Study

When deciding on methodology for this research it was also imperative that consideration was given to who will benefit from the research and the whether the design of the research was appropriate. From this stance it was acknowledged that this research design must be appreciative of the philosophy of youth work and its

fundamental role of offering all young people the right to participate in making decisions, planning and reviewing actions which concern them (WAG, 2007). By recognising that the young people we work with are stakeholders to their own learning, when looking to research a topic that is relevant to them and considering the design, we should question whether it enables them to become the creators of knowledge and will it empower them to become agents of change.

### Participatory Research Project

“Participatory evaluation with young people is meant to empower young people, and can make a real contribution to the development process itself. It has the potential to transform situations in the process of learning more about them”.

(Gawler 2005:5)

For the purpose of this study and the many factors relating to the project, a participatory research project was decided upon by a group of seven young parents and two full time Youth workers, which include the researcher. Participative research is thought to produce knowledge in a social constructionist way, it is more useful to those whose situation is being researched and it shares the power between the researcher and the researched (Dodson and Baker, 1995). A major feature of participatory research is that it allows for different groups within a community share their views on issues that concern them. Historically research has been carried out by those who are experienced and yet are an outsider to the group. This allows for a certain degree of power over the researched, However, for those who are genuinely interested and respectful of the views of young people then participatory research gives privilege to those who wish to truly understand the thoughts views and opinions of those whose issue is being researched.

Prior to this study commencing it was necessary to consider the advantage, disadvantages of participatory research the challenges that could be identified and what factors could influence the success (or not) of the study. Therefore, the works of Hart (1992) and De Koning and Martin (1996) were studied to give consideration to the level of participation that could be expected from the young parents. Although Hart (1992) suggests that if we are to design, develop and conduct research with young people that are truly participatory, we must, it seems, involve young parents in all aspects of the research. However, recognising that as young parent your time is limited and your commitment to your child's immediate welfare is more important it was felt that the young parent's participation in the project would be guided by their own judgement. This sentiment is also backed by De Koning and Martin (1996) who argue that participatory research should serve the shared interests of both researchers and the researched, and should emphasise the process of knowledge production.

### Procedure

As the researcher runs a number of projects working with young mothers, it was possible to find and engage with a group relatively easily. However the affect of no funding for the project as well as child care difficulties limited the number of participants that could become involved. A considerable amount of time was spent by the co coordinator in disseminating the information regarding the project and making phone calls to encourage all of the teenage/young parents to participate. This resulted in seven young mothers aged between 18 and 24 years of age. The group was trained which consisted of a short session discussing research approaches and data gathering methodologies, as well as confidentiality and safety aspects (Appendix 3).

The group of young parents at the request of the researcher were invited to research an issue that they felt was important to their situation. They were interested on reflecting on their experiences of being young parents, the issues they faced prior to expecting a child, during the pregnancy and issues they felt would affect them or their peers in the future. They looked to analyse the difference between accessibility to services and support that was available to young parents in urban areas compared to young parents living in rural areas.

### Focus Group

“A focus group is a data collection procedure in the form of a carefully planned group discussion among about 6 to 10 people plus a moderator and observer, in order to obtain diverse ideas and perceptions on a topic of interest in a relaxed, permissive environment that fosters the expression of different points of view, with no pressure for consensus”

(OMNI 1995)

The first method of gathering evidence was through a focus group of which the young parents synchronized the arrangements for. They agreed on ground rules prior to the research. The ground rules were displayed throughout the discussion, on a flip chart page that was clearly visible. If anyone wished to add any comments to the ground rules throughout the focus group they were encouraged to do so. The purpose of the focus group was re established and participants were each given a consent form that reiterated the reason for the study (Appendix 4). The group discussion was coordinated by the moderator, who was unanimously chosen by the group and was able to guide the discussion. The moderator recognised the importance of being neutral, focused and prepared to generate clarifying questions where necessary. As stated by Welton (2011) Clarifying questions and probes gives the interview respondent clues as to how specific you would like their answers to be

and asking them for clarification, details, and examples. The moderator followed a simple format (Appendix 5), to isolate major themes, develop questions for each theme and develops probes for each question (Welton, 2011) which were recorded by means of note taking (Appendix 6). The data was then transcribed and coded by two members of the group, each member of the group looked for patterns and themes to emerge and these were noted, discussed and analysed (Appendix 7).

#### Positive Aspects of the focus group

The use of this method of gathering information was agreed by all members of the group, the group dialogue helped to generate rich information, as participants' insights tended to "trigger" the sharing of others' personal experiences and perspectives. This method proved more beneficial as the young parents were all happy to discuss some complex topics and subjects that may have been missed in other methods such as interviews or questionnaires. The young parents were the experts themselves as they had direct experience with the issues they were discussing, this benefit might have been lost had the research been carried out by someone outside the group, with little or no first-hand experience or understanding of matters important to young parents. As the group arranged to meet in a familiar and regularly used area the group were comfortable with their surroundings.

#### Negative Aspects of the focus group

Time management is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of conducting focus groups. It was important that the moderator and the group agreed upon the amount of time they wished to spend on the process. Although, the time was managed appropriately so that all the topics could be covered, the young parents each had their own interesting perspective to share and therefore the depth of

discussion on each topic varied. As this was a relatively small group and the young parents were from near by locality the information gathered would be limited to a whole population of young parents in rural Carmarthenshire

### Interviews

As all the young parents were involved with the Youth Service they then looked to interview a small number of young parents that were not involved with Youth Services as well as two Youth Workers. It was agreed that two entirely different interview questions were need. Firstly the view of the Youth Workers were required to gather evidence on the support they felt they could offer young parents, as well as, challenges they felt the Youth Service faced to deliver a widely accessible service, especially considering Carmarthenshire's vast rurality (Appendix 8). Secondly the views from young parents were needed to triangulate the evidence from the three separate groups (Appendix 9). These questions would gain insight into whether being involved with Youth Work had any bearing on issues faced by young parents.

The interview questions were designed by the young parents. Four of the young parents chose to carry out the interviews, one to take notes and observe and one to question. A guideline of interview techniques were given to the young parents prior to setting questions and a number of necessary skills were considered, including good listening skills, being focused, prepared and remaining neutral. It was agreed that the questions should be open ended so as the interviewee could expand on the topic if desired. The purpose of the interview was explained to all participants prior to the interview taking place and consent forms were distributed to each young parent.

(Appendix 10). The interview notes were analyzed as a group and the two sets of interview answers were compared the answers were identified and coded by themes across questions, across respondents (Appendix 11)

### Positive aspects of the interviews

The individual in-depth interviews were probed at length to explore remarks. As group pressure was eliminated, the individuals could be open with their views and detailed understanding could be gained without views of the respondent being influenced by what other people say or may think. The young parents felt that by interviewing people face to face would offer a higher response than issuing questionnaires.

### Disadvantages

Although the researchers found interviewing beneficial to the research project they also acknowledged this was far more time consuming method than the focus group. They also acknowledged that some of the young parents they interviewed were reluctant to discuss their feelings for fear of lack of anonymity.

### Summary

Although as informal educators we look to use every opportunity to engage young people in activities that will promote their learning we must also ruminates youth works voluntary engagement concept. The young people have the choice to freely engage and determine when to break their involvement with youth work participation. As Jeffs and Smith (2010) state this unique way of working has fundamental implications on the way we can work with young people and the opportunities we can offer. In the case of the participatory research project a number of challenges were



identified. Commitment to the project by a few of the young parents was unpredictable. Although a very few of young parents agreed to participate initially, due to circumstances they withdrew from the group. Having the necessary time to develop research skills was limited and therefore it was acknowledged that some tasks the young parents felt difficult which contributed to loss of motivation. However, whilst the participatory research project highlighted potential benefits to the research process itself, the benefits to the young people who participated far outweighed that of the results. Through their own reflection and evaluation of the research project the young parents confirmed that they had gained knowledge, skills and confidence and a great deal of enjoyment from carrying out a task as a group.

Although it was stated in the original fieldwork plan that the project would consider the needs of young parents which refers to young fathers as well as young mothers a number of factors presented themselves which altered the outcome of the paper.

Although a number of young fathers were approached and asked to participate in the research project unfortunately this was met with a negative response. Although a small proportion of the interviews were carried out with young fathers, the views are predominantly from young mothers. In a minority of cases where young fathers were being interviewed the interviews had to be terminated due to unforeseen circumstances.

## 4. Results

The results seen in this section interpret the findings of the participatory research carried out, by young people and Youth Workers. The evidence will look to identify how effectively the Youth Service responds to the needs of young parents living in rural Wales.

The results recorded are taken directly from the evidence gathered, observation and notes taken by the researcher through focus groups and interviews with both young parents and Youth Workers.

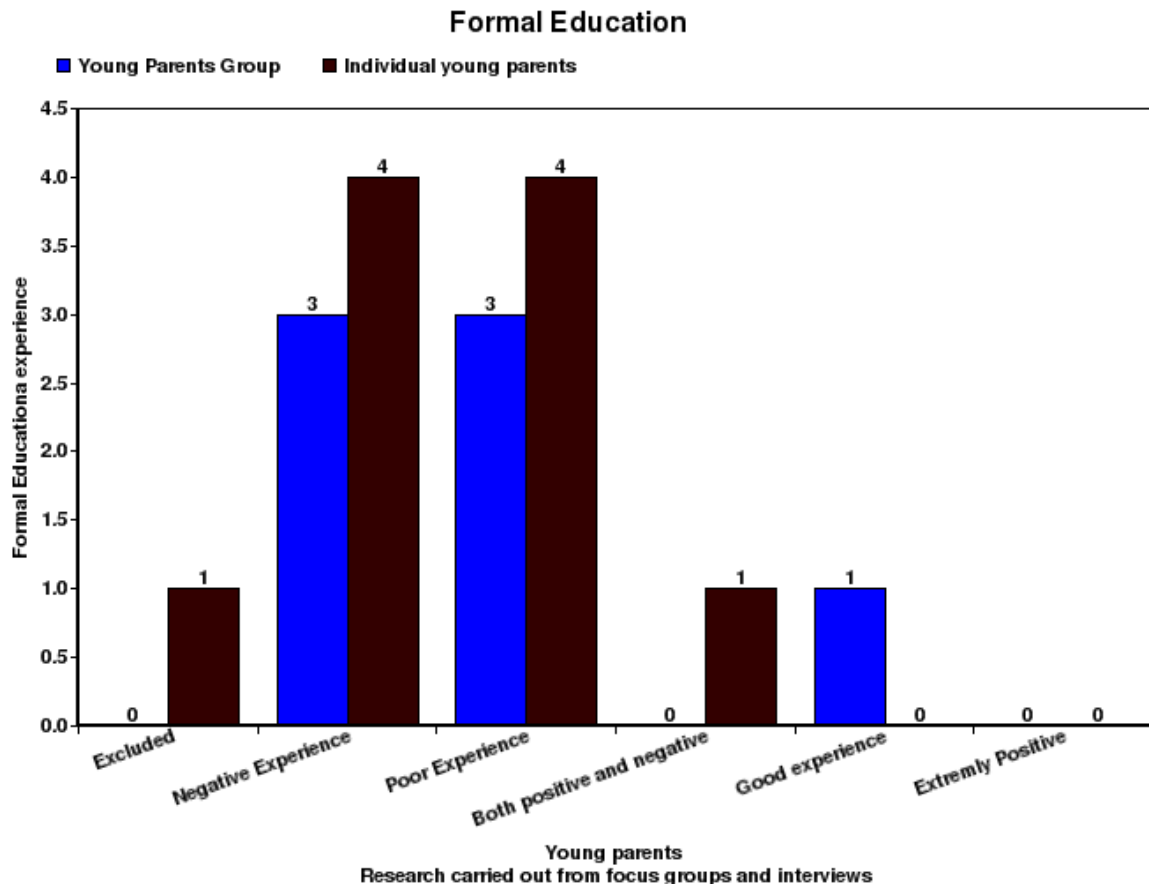
From a qualitative perspective the researcher has transcribed 5 500 words of data evidence which is currently stored on a USB stick held in a secure place. This is available to interested parties only through written request via Trinity Saint David. The evidence gathered has been systematically analysed and coded to identify common themes and patterns that have emerged from the research process. These themes and results are presented below.

### Experiences of young people prior to having their first child.

Prior to understanding the needs of the young parents the researcher felt it important to gain a clearer picture of where young parents were in their lives socially and emotionally before the birth of their child. A number of questions were considered to increase background knowledge of the young people participating in the research project.

Formal Education

The graph below demonstrates young parents' experiences of formal education



The majority of the young parents participating in the focus group expressed that they had a less than positive experience of formal education. All of the young parents in the group finished their education with what they classed as unsatisfactory results. Although 5 out of the 7 expressed that the most positive aspect was having a close group of friends all of the young parents in the group stated that they found the majority of subjects boring.

“I hated school and could not wait to leave; I was useless so just use to mess about.”

Comment from young parent

Results from individual interviews demonstrated an almost identical pattern, with just one young parent being excluded from formal education at the age of 15. On the issue of careers and curriculum, about 5 in 10 young parents stated that the subjects they studied were not relevant to them. Four out of the ten young people interviewed felt that their lack of reading ability held them back. Just one out of the ten young parents wanted to stay on in school and gain higher qualifications.

“I could have done better in school I wanted to be a nurse but I got distracted and did not get good exam results. “

Young parent comment from interview.

#### Non – Formal Education and youth participation

Evidence gathered from the young parents group demonstrated that only 3 of the 7 young people out of the focus group had the opportunity of engagement of Youth Service provision prior to joining the young mum’s group. Only one young person had made contact with a school based Youth Worker during their time in school and only two had participated for a short while in youth club activities. 4 out of 7 young people did not know of the Youth Service before joining the group and 3 of the young parent’s stated that they did not know about services available to them when they were younger.

“I got referred to a woman who was good at listening and helped me with a bullying issue I think she was a Youth Worker in the school”

#### Views of the young parents on Youth Participation

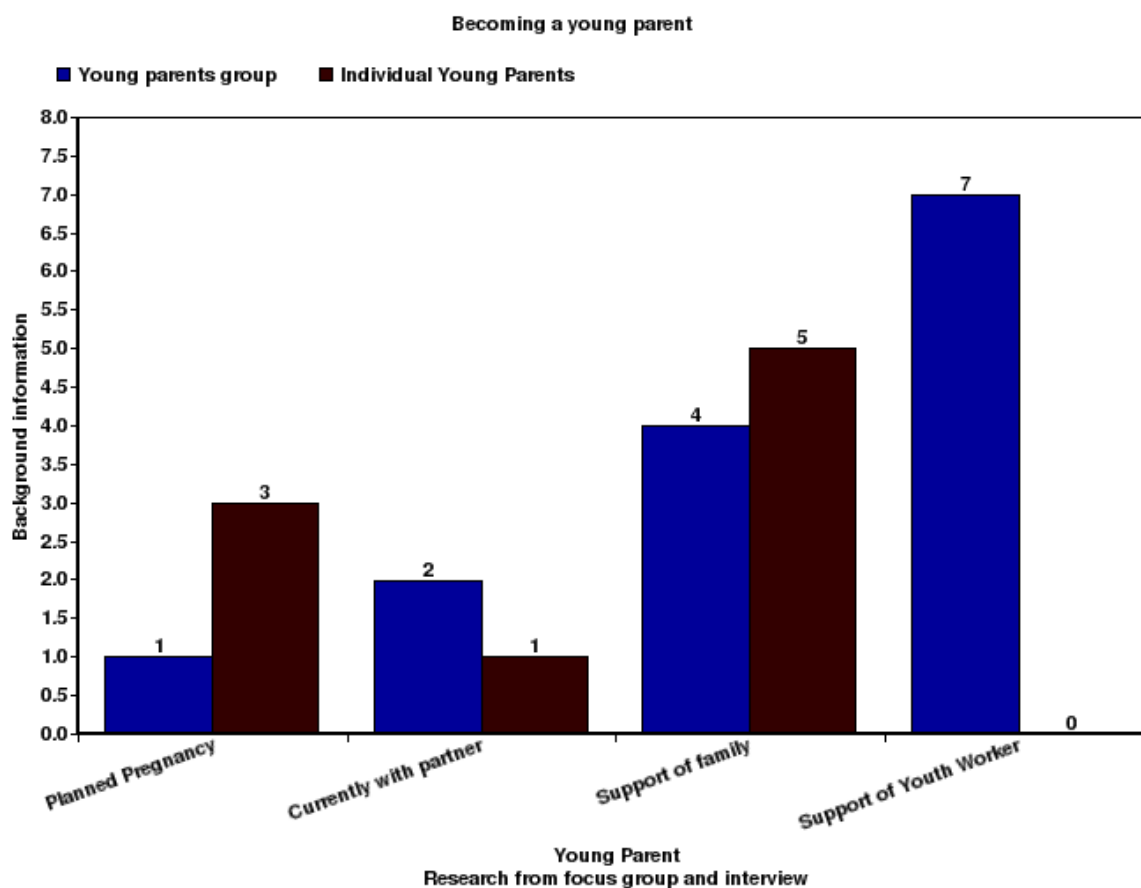
Out of the individuals that were interviewed 4 stated that they had participated in Youth Work activities. Just 1 young parent had experienced youth participation

through a Young Farmers Group and 3 of the interviewees through Girl Guides when they were twelve years of age. None of the young parent's had received support from a school based Youth Worker and did not remember one being present in their school. Since leaving school 2 of the young people had sort careers advice however, were made to feel inadequate due to lack of qualifications.

“You could tell the guy was looking down his nose at me because I said I had been in trouble with the police and had no GCSE's so he just gave me a list of jobs I could probably do. They were all really boring so did not go back again.”

### Becoming a Young Parent

This graph offers some background information on the young parents participating in the research. To identify the needs of young parents living in rural communities the researcher felt it was necessary to understand their current situation and the support they were currently receiving.



The results gleaned from the parent's who currently engaged with the 'young mum's group' demonstrate that only 1 out of 7 of the group had planned their pregnancy. 5 of the young parent's had stated that their pregnancy had been an accident and 1 young parent admitted although it had not been planned they had intentionally not taken precautions to prevent a pregnancy from occurring. 3 out of the 7 seven young parents stated that they were not in a full time relationship when conception occurred and 2 out of the 7 young parents are in a relationship with the father of the child.

4 out of 7 of the young parents considered that they had a good relationship with a member or members of their family which provided them with some support. However, 3 young parents stated that they had no support from either their family or a partner and relied solely on the "Young mum's" group for a support network.

“Until I got involved with this group I could hardly be bothered to get dressed in the day. It would just be me and the baby so what was the point.”

All of the young parents participating in the focus group now belong to the 'young mum's group' delivered by the Youth Service.

Results gathered from the interviews with individual young parents not involved with the group express that 3 out of 10 of the young parents planned their pregnancy. However through later discussion revealed that 2 out of the 3 had not revealed their intentions to their partner at the time.

“I just wanted a baby and I thought that by getting pregnant he would stay with me and we'd have a sort of family of our own..... That's all I have really wanted.”

“I wanted to be a mam. I knew he would freak but thought he would be ok when she was born.”

5 out of the 10 young parents interviewed stated they did have support from family members, however 3 of the 5 felt that the support they received often felt like they were being controlled.

“It's like she doesn't trust me with my own kid. I feel I am always getting it wrong and being judged.... might as well let her get on with it.

(Young Parents view of living with her mother and father)

### Issues facing Young parents living in rural Wales

To gain a greater understanding of the needs of young parent's living in rural areas of Wales both the focus group as well as interviews focused on a number of issue that were specific to their rural locality and the impact it had on theirs and their children's quality of life.

7 out of the 7 young parent's participating in the focus group expressed their frustration at not being able to access important services easily. 1 out of the 7 had a driving licence however could not afford to run a car. All of the young parents had to rely either on public transport or friends and family to transport them. Doctors, health centres and other essential service providers were also difficult to access, which for 2 of the young parent's had prevented them from attending a dental practice since their children had been born. All of the young parents felt that being able to access an indoor play area with their child was important, however, it was unanimously agreed that this was problematic as public transport and opening times did not coincide with each other. 3 of the young parents had a child attending a village pre school group; however, 2 out of 3 living some miles from the village still found accessing the group difficult.

“Although there is an Ysgol Meithrin in the village, by the time I get my daughter there, walk home it is time for me to return.”

2 of the 7 young parents' relied solely on the young mum's group for group interaction and did not attend any other social groups with their child.

“If it was not for this group I would probably not see any other young mum's like me for weeks.”

Results taken from the interviews with young parents unattached to the group displayed similar issues.

3 out of 10 young parents interviewed had their own transport with the remaining 7 relying on public transport. Difficulty in accessing services was also highlighted.

“To take my son to the Doctors I have to try and get an appointment around the same time as the bus gets to town. Then we normally have to hang around for ages to get a bus home.”



3 of the 10 young parents interviewed had children attending the pre school group and expressed that not only did their child benefit from attending but it was also a good way for them to meet other young parents as they did not belong to any other social groups. Only 1 of the young parents interviewed had at some point attended a family centre but felt out of place as she was the youngest parent in the group

### Opportunities

In the focus group it was unanimously agreed that there were limited opportunities for young parents to obtain work both part time and full time. 6 out of the 7 young people stated that child care was preventing them from returning to work. 5 out of the 7 young parents felt that the lack of jobs in their surrounding area was preventing them from seeking employment and 7 out of 7 of the young parents considered a number of factors such as lack of affordable child care, lack of suitable employment and transport issues being a barrier for many young parents to re entering employment or training.

In the focus group 6 out of the 7 young parent's had spoken to the Youth Workers with regards to re entering training or employment and each stated that this had enabled them to broaden their own views on what they would like to do in the future. 4 of the 7 young people who had worked with a Youth Worker had devised a plan of action and were in the process of applying to college to further their education and opportunities. 1 of the 7 young parent's was in the process of moving nearer to town with her child and to be closer to her family and was receiving support from the youth worker on this process and 1 of the young parents was expecting their second child in the near future and had not made any immediate plans.

“With the support of x I have decided to go to college to study for a qualification in childcare. I was not really sure what I wanted to do before but x has helped me look at what I am good at and encouraged me to try.”

“Before I had my baby I use to waitress in a pub, I quite enjoyed it but the hours are a bit unsociable and I could not do it now with the little one but x suggested that I should look at doing hospitality in college so when my baby is older I can get a job that I really enjoy.”

Results from interviews with young parents demonstrated similar findings with only 1 in 10 of the young parents being in paid employment. 9 of the 10 young parents are not working or in education or training. 7 out of the 10 young parents when asked had no immediate plans to re enter employment or training. 1 out of the 10 young parents interviewed stated that she wanted a large family and did not want to go to work. 7 out of 10 were unsure of what they would like to do in the future and 9 out of 10 felt that the barriers such as child care, lack of job opportunity and not having suitable skills were preventing them from exploring work or training opportunities. 4 of the young people admitted being frightened of not being able to cope with a job and looking after a child and were unsure of how it would affect their benefit entitlement. None of the young people interviewed had received any support from the Youth Service.

The interviews with 2 of the Youth Workers identified a number of key issues with regards to opportunities for young parents living in rural Wales. They both agreed that the situation with employment was limited and also due to a lack of transport and affordable child care many of the young parents faced barriers preventing them from going to college or seeking employment. However both also stated that a lack of confidence and knowledge of what support was available to young parents also had been apparent when beginning work with the young parents in the group. Also a

lack of belief in themselves had inhibited them from seeking a solution to many of the issues they faced.

“Sometimes all they need is someone to tell them they are capable of achieving their goals for them to start believing in themselves.”

Youth Worker X

“Very often I find that it is a lack of confidence that is preventing them from achieving what they want. I am not saying that there aren't issues that make it difficult, however with support these can be overcome.”

Youth Worker Y

### Isolation and Stigmatization

During the focus group discussion as well as interviews the issue of feeling isolated was a reoccurring theme. 6 out of the 7 young parents stated that they felt isolated from their peers during their pregnancies as well as after the birth of their child. The same young parents also stated that they did not have a sense of belonging, they felt different to other mothers in their communities and they felt they were being frowned upon for having a child so young. Before joining the young parent's group 6 out of 7 stated that they felt lonely and isolated.

“It was a really scary time. All my friends were still at school and leading normal lives and I was stuck at home with my baby, although my mum tried to help I missed seeing people of my own age.”

“Looking back I had not realised how lonely I was. I did not like going out with my son because I felt people were gossiping about me and all though my friends from school called around a few times they were at school in the day and I was stuck at home.”

The young parents were unanimous in their feelings towards belonging to the young parents group.

“This group has really helped me. I feel comfortable because we are all in a similar situation and no one judges us.”

“The group makes me feel like I am part of a family; we all help each other out by looking after each others babies if we want a break. Or if we are feeling a bit down we give each other a bit of support. The Youth Workers don't

interfere they are just like part of the family too they get us to try out new activities with our babies.”

X and Y are really great, they do not judge you like the health visitor or my social worker they just encourage you all the time. We get to do so many things together that we would not be able to do on our own.

The interviews with young parents not attached to the group displayed similar findings with the issue of isolation and stigmatisation with 7 out of the 10 young parents stating that one of the negative aspects of being a young parent is losing your circle of friends, not being able to go out and socialise. The feeling of loneliness and disconnection from peers and communities was commented upon by 8 out of the 10 young parents being interviewed.

“Some days I do not see anyone apart from the old lady living next door I miss just being able to go out with my friends when ever I want.”

“I do not feel like I fit in any more, I have grown up by having my baby but my friends are all still young and have no responsibility.”

2 of the 10 young parents interviewed stated that although they saw each other a couple of times a week isolation was considered a major factor. Not just in reference to where the young parents lived but also within their communities.

“People do not realise how lonely it can be being at home with just your baby for company some days I feel really depressed.”

8 out of the 10 young parents agreed that they felt society judged them negatively. They stated that they were deemed as being irresponsible for having a baby so young and not having a partner. They also felt that professionals working for health services were critical of their capabilities and spoke to them in a condescending manner.

“I over heard a woman at the bus stop saying it was disgusting having a baby so young to which the other woman replied, they only do it to get free housing. I felt so upset hearing these comments”.

Results gained from the interview with the Youth Workers implied that both workers recognised fully the extent of isolation many of the young parents felt on becoming new parents. They commented on how it was not just their locality that was the cause but a disconnection from their friends and the rest of communities.

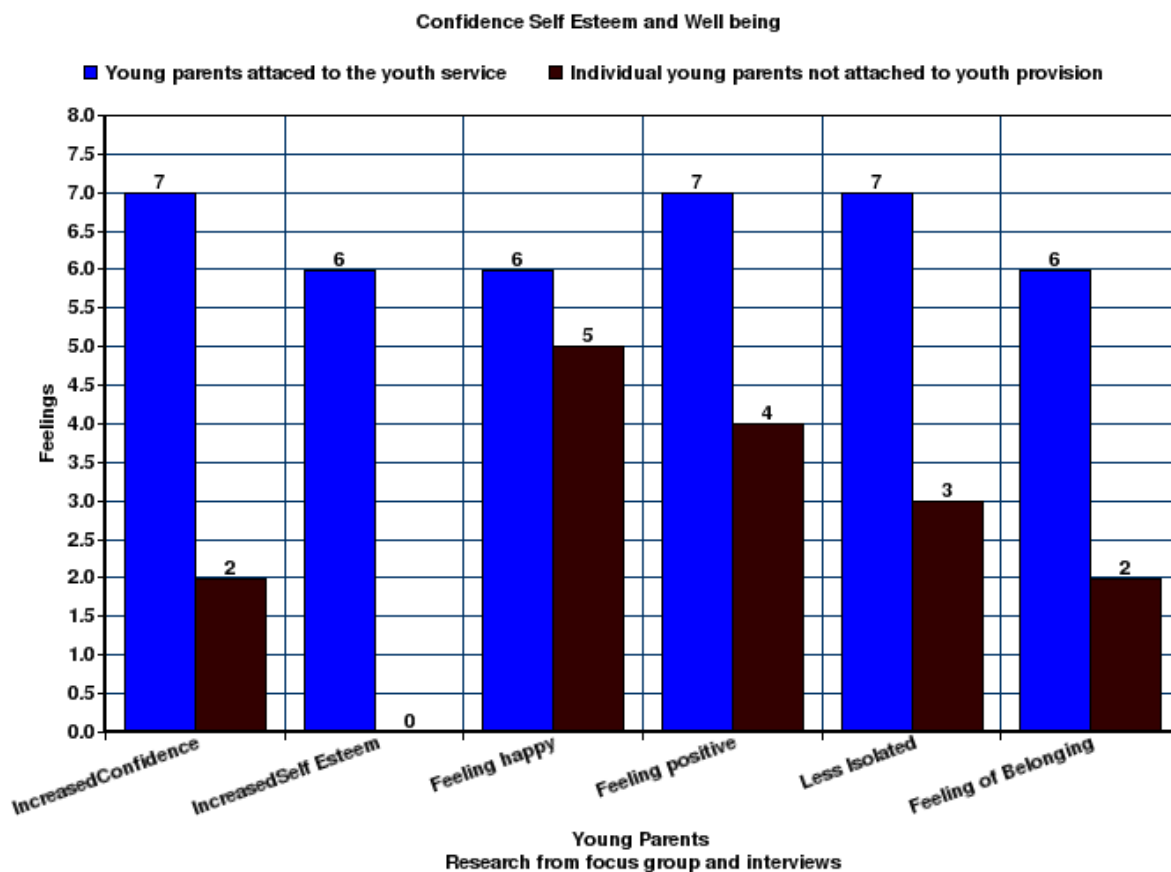
“I have met some young parents who are not coping well because of the lack of friendship and support that has been available to her since having a baby. It is not that these young parents are less capable than older mothers; in fact they are often more so, it is just that they are very much on their own. Their confidence and self esteem are rock bottom.”

Youth Worker y

“Many of the young parents I work with, individually to begin with, are extremely lonely. Through the young parent groups we look to give them not only support but a sense of belonging. This is so important to their well being”.

### Confidence Self Esteem and Wellbeing

The graph below represents the feelings of the young parents who are now attached to Youth Service support and those young parents who do not have contact with the Youth Service.



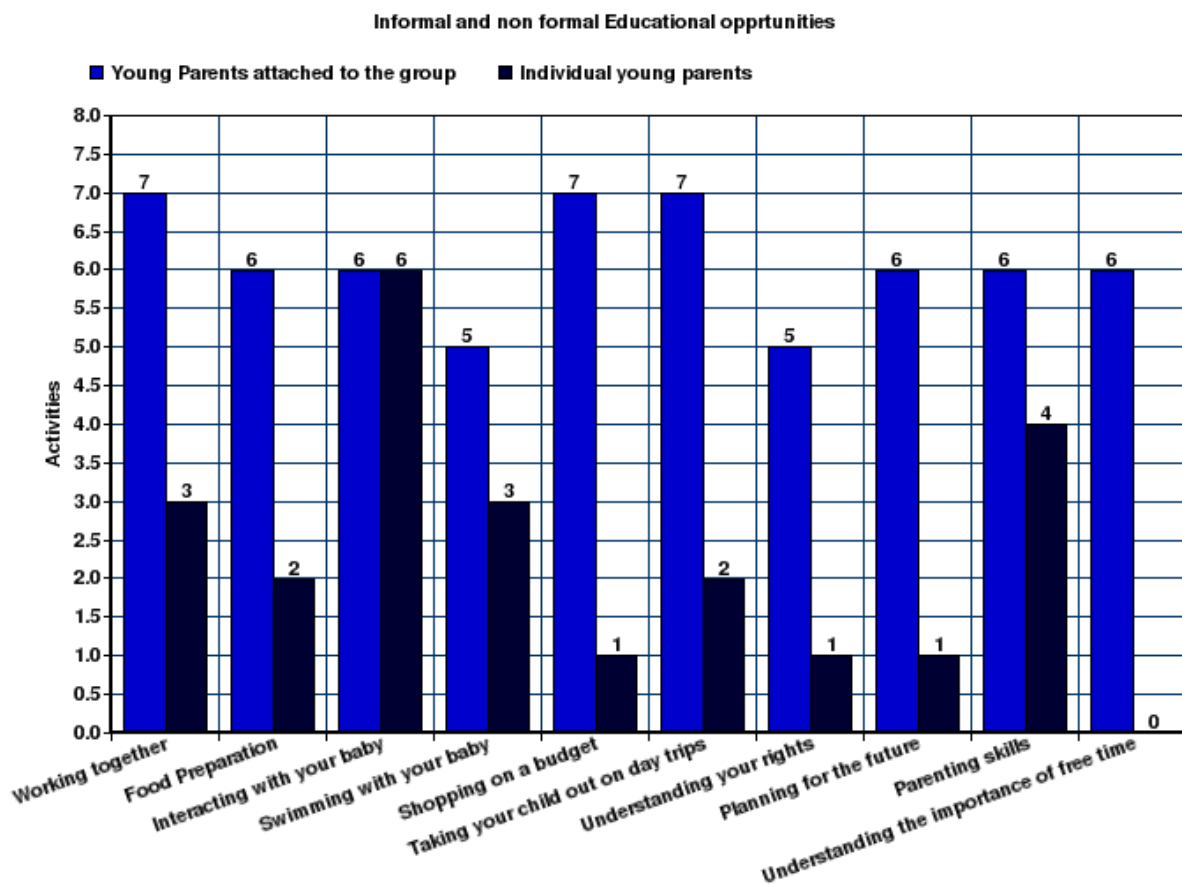
Through both group participation and individual support the graph show evidence of an increased feeling of wellbeing, self esteem and confidence amongst those young parents who have or are engaging in Youth Work activities. For those young parents who do not receive support from the Youth Service only 2 out of the 10 stated that their confidence had increased since having a child although 0 reported having increased self esteem. Although 5 out of 10 stated they were relatively happy only three out of 10 felt less isolated than they had since having their child and only 2 out of 10 had the sense of belonging.

Through interviews with the Youth Workers both agreed unanimously that all the young parents they had made contact with had improved confidence, however raising self esteem amongst young parents was often more difficult to measure. The Youth Workers stated that by working in groups with the young parents they felt it

created a sense of belonging and helped young parents build communities. The Youth Workers also raised the subject of empowerment, stating that prior to some of the young people joining the group there was a feeling of despondency. Yet with increased confidence the young people were taking action to consider the futures of both themselves and their Childs in a positive way.

Informal and non formal educational opportunities

All participants were asked to mark their confidence and skills they felt they had acquired since becoming a young parent. The chart shows the results from both the focus group and young parents who were interviewed.



Comments from the Youth Workers were analysed. Both Youth Workers agreed that they felt it was important to offer young parents a wide variety of non formal educational activities that would enhance the young people's confidence and skills. They felt that the group setting was an ideal place for young people to participate in informal educational activities which increased their confidence self esteem and well being.

"We try and offer the young parents different activities so as to increase their confidence. We know that they are still young people and the opportunity to be with friends is still vital in their transition through to adulthood."

Youth Worker Y

Finally, to conclude this chapter, comments from 2 of the young parents.

"I love coming to the young mum's group, we do loads of fun activities, things I would have been too nervous to do on my own. Like water babies and baby yoga. The Youth Workers are really great and reassure you and make you feel you have something to offer."

"Since being in touch with Y I feel I can now do so much more. I understand about my benefits, she has helped me with college applications and I have made great friends in the group".



## 5 .Discussion, analysis and interpretation of the data

The evidence presented in chapter 4 identified the main findings of the participatory research carried out by young parents and Youth Workers. Here a more detailed discussion will take place in order to examine the effectiveness of the Youth Service response to the needs of young parents living in rural Wales. This chapter will explore the main themes that emerged from the research and relate these to the theoretical and policy discussion in that of the literature review.

### Formal Education

The Social Exclusion Unit's (1999) understanding of why British teenagers become pregnant, points towards a lack of understanding and knowledge of contraception, what to expect in relationships and what it means to be a parent. However, despite sex education being delivered by schools, it must be considered whether the formal educational approach to this subject, which relies mainly on conveying information about sex, is effective. Evidence provided previously has shown that the majority of young parents expressed less than positive attitudes towards formal education, finding subjects either boring or irrelevant and yet very few had the opportunity of engagement in a Youth Service provision. Having established that the core aim of Youth Work is to support the personal and social development of young people through both non-formal and an informal educational approach, with both approaches often interlinked (McGivney, 1999,:1 cited in Colley *et al*, 2002:1) we may question whether claims for the superiority of formal learning in certain areas of young people's lives should be reconsidered. Through the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 we acknowledge that Youth Work's philosophy recognises that what is learned in educational settings is as much about the nature of those settings as it is

about the pedagogical approach, understanding that many young people will acquire knowledge and understanding outside the formal learning context. Although this type of learning does not necessarily lead to certification, it is, however, intentional and relevant from the learner's perspective. Youth Work recognises that non-formal education is based on the notion that in order to obtain effective results it is necessary to identify and provide for the real needs of people. For young people to gain understanding, knowledge and consider their own values with regards to sexual relationships and what it means to become a young parent they must have ownership of their own learning. Presenting facts is not enough, formal education systems do not consider the students' standards, values and attitudes. Youth Work, however, starts where young people are in their lives, working from their interests, supporting and broadening young people's experiences so as they may make sense of their own learning. As a consequence, enabling them to have a more promising chance of being able to make positive choices and decisions which affect their futures.

### Belonging and Relationships

Through much of the reviewed literature (Chapter 2) the emphasis is placed on young parents having unplanned pregnancies. Although the evidence gathered through this research supports this claim, with 90% of young parents engaged in the research confirming their pregnancy was unplanned, a large amount of quantitative evidence discusses the relationship between unplanned pregnancy and poverty and disadvantage. Less is recorded with regards to young parent's feelings after child birth and their specific needs. Although Coleman and Carter (2006) consider that by starting a family whilst being young can offer a turning point in many young people

lives, this does not eradicate the fact that young parents still have specific needs. This research highlights the significance of a support network being essential to young parent's wellbeing. From a Youth Work perspective the importance of understanding young people's needs and responding to them in a collaborative and empowering way is imperative to the way in which we work. This research recognises that although these young people are now in a situation where their lives are have taken a different direction to that of their peers, acknowledgement is made that young parents are still at an important transition period in their own lives. In both the interviews and focus groups only half the young parents indicated that they had support from family members and only a small percentage had the support from their babies' father. The Youth Workers interviewed, identified that the demands of caring for a baby at a time when the young people themselves are making the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood were significant. They also recognised that young mothers and young fathers needed additional support from family or partners to improve outcomes for themselves and their children. This understanding of the specific needs of young parents has been neglected in much of the current literature with only Youth Work documents emphasising the unique way in which Youth Workers look to establish positive relationships which then enable them to respond to young people's needs, which includes young parents. Recommendations set down in policy documents and literature on parenthood generally fails to understand that young parents have differing needs than from those of more mature parents. This finding is also backed by the young parents themselves, who gave less than positive accounts of their experiences with other adults in authority and most importantly health professionals.

This comprehensive study of the impact on the young parents attached to the Young Parents Group delivered by the Youth Service demonstrates that a positive support system had been accomplished. Those young parents who had joined the group spoke optimistically and with clarity of the benefits they had gained for both themselves and their children. The young parents identified how through working together as a group had increased their sense of belonging and had helped combat the feeling of isolation. Group association had also offered the young parents the opportunity to share knowledge and experiences and become active participants in their own development.

The evaluation concluded that having a dedicated lead professional, providing holistic support, was valued by the young parents. The Youth Workers were able not only to provide a generic support role, but also provided the young parents with access to a range of specialist services, such as breastfeeding, counselling services and help to re-engage with the community groups. However, emerging strongly from the study was the significance of belonging and feeling of being empowered to take control of theirs and their children's futures due to their positive experience of Youth Work.

#### Opportunities and rural isolation

Current policy identifies the need not only to reduce teenage pregnancy rates but also emphasises the importance of re-engaging young parent's in education, employment or training (DfES, 2010). However, the research has demonstrated that the young parents were not lacking ambition or motivation but were pragmatic in recognising that due to their rural location and parental responsibility there were many barriers restricting their opportunities. However, the research findings

demonstrated that there was a significant difference between the attitudes of young parents engaged with the Youth Service and those who were not with regards to finding a solution to their current circumstances.

The young parents attached to the 'Young Parents Group' identified how through being able to access an appropriate level of support from the Youth Service, they were in the position to make informed choices about their futures. Despite many having a less than positive experience of formal education in the past, through engagement in Youth Work activities their attitudes had altered, believing that they did have the ability to re enter education and secure training that would have improved outcomes for themselves and their child. For others in the group by acquiring the skills of team work, confidence, communication and self realisation they were also optimistic with regards to seeking and gaining employment at an appropriate time in their child's lives.

The Youth Workers interviewed recognised that that certain groups of young people face multiple barriers of inclusion into society and being able to access education, training or employment opportunities whilst caring for a child still requires a specific approach. Although systems of support are currently being recommended by the Welsh Government, such as the new Youth Engagement and Employment plans (WAG, 2009) and 'Pathway to Work' for 16-17 year olds (WAG, 2011), young parent's require encouragement and self belief along with much needed support before they are at the stage to contemplate re entering training or employment. Youth Workers recognised that by transferring valuable life skills to the young parents they were working with, along with enabling young parents gain the ability to take meaning from their own learning and achievements, promoted confidence, self

esteem and a belief that they were valuable members of their communities with much to offer.

Evaluation of the evidenced gained from this subject demonstrated that Youth Work provides learning opportunities, including and especially those that are available outside of the formal classroom environment. These were identified by respondents as being very important to improve later life chances not only positive transitions into the labour market but also as a means of supporting young people as parents and as active and responsible citizens.

### Isolation and Stigmatisation

Through Youth Work literature it is apparent that the profession recognises that forming friendships, “hanging out together” and the feeling of belonging is a natural part of adolescent development. As Coleman & Hendry, (1999) state that regardless of the structure and norms of a particular peer group they will play an extremely important role in the psychological development of adolescents. However, much of research tends to disregard the importance of Young Parents feeling of belonging and the impact friendship groups have on their wellbeing. For many of the young parents not being able to meet with their friends or access spaces and places where they were accepted played a major theme in their discussion. The young parents who have had the opportunity of forming social networks through their association with the Youth Service have documented the importance of regaining the feeling of belonging, demonstrating that being with others in a supportive environment has built emotional resilience, aided them in decision making, placing them firmly in control of their present and their future. Being supported by not only Youth Workers but their

peers has played a vital role in supporting young parents to realise they can achieve their ambitions.

The stigmatisation surrounding being a teenage parent was one many of the young mothers identified with. They recognised that not only did the Government view teenage conception as a social problem (DfES, 2010) but they also were aware of the continuous negative portrayal of young parents in the media. It was, therefore, no surprise that this negativity had a poor affect on their self – esteem and wellbeing.

Through the reviewed Youth Work literature, it is possible to identify that not only does the Youth Service look to support the young parents in taking action themselves to tackle problems they face but effective youth work is also central to advocating on behalf of young parents, The Youth Service believes strongly that young parents should have a voice in everything that affects them and that voice can re inform public and Government perceptions.

#### Confidence, self esteem and well being

A noticeable strand running through much of the literature explored was the lack of documented voices of young parents themselves. Through carrying out this participatory research the young parents were able to both convey their actual lived experiences of being a young parent and identify and articulate their real concerns and needs. The Youth Service continuously encourages this type of reflection and looks to support young people at every opportunity in taking ownership of evaluating how their learning experiences have impacted on their own development (LLUK, 2008:37).

Evidence has shown that the difference between those who have had the opportunity of engaging in Youth Work is significantly more positive with more

promising outcomes to them and their child compared to their peers. Through Youth Participation young parents have reported an increased confidence, self esteem and the general feeling of wellbeing. The ability to explore their values and beliefs and access important decisions with regards to their futures and that of their child

### Conclusion of discussion

In providing an exploration into the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered this paper has been able to explore and provide evidence of the contribution the Youth Service has on the needs of young parents living in rural Wales. Through reviewing relevant literature on the subject of young parents and their specific needs it has been able to demonstrate the positive impact and outcomes of participation in Youth Work activities has had on those young parents accessing the service. However, it has highlighted the gap in research with regards to young parents needs and has shown that focus is largely centred on the prevention of teenage pregnancies rather than promoting positive outcomes for those young people who enter parenthood at an early age.

The final chapter of this paper will draw out the main findings and offer directions for further research.



## 6. Conclusion

### Summary

This study has considered how effectively the Youth Service responds to the needs of young parent's living in rural areas of Wales and has generated a number of findings that will be relevant to young parent's, the Youth Service as well as policy makers and other practioners working with young people.

As outlined in Chapter 1 the main focus of this study was to demonstrate that through engagement in Youth Work activities young parents will receive the support they need to make a successful transition into adulthood. Despite widespread policy concern that there are unacceptable high levels of unintended teenage pregnancies, the focus of the paper was to highlight that being a young parent in itself is not a social problem. However the specific needs of young parents especially living in rural areas needed to be addressed.

From the review of literature outlined in Chapter 2 the researcher identified that the policy context in Britain surrounding young parents is orientated towards the prevention of unintended pregnancy. This was identified by a number of reports including the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) which saw teenage pregnancy as a major social and economic problem. Although a number of studies including National Academy for parenting (2010) recognised that young parents were amongst the most vulnerable members of the population, the researcher found that there was a limited amount of literature that focused specifically on the needs of young parents, especially those living in rural areas.

A participatory research method was chosen to gather data and provide evidence to support the hypothesis of the paper. Participatory research allowed the researcher to work closely with the young parents, identify the real issues that concerned them and give voice to a vulnerable group of young people. It was recognised that this method of research would not only generate knowledge for themselves and for others but would also empower them to carry out actions and enable them to address issues that they felt were of importance.

It is useful in this final chapter to place the findings of this study into its correct context. It is essential to appreciate that this study which included 17 young parents is not intended to be statistically representative of all young parents living in rural areas of Wales. It must also be noted that only young parents who volunteered to participate in both the interviews and focus group were included and as stated in Chapter 3. No young fathers were available to contribute to the research. Nonetheless, this relatively small scale qualitative study demonstrates the findings to be a detailed insight to the lives of these 17 young parents.

Chapters 4 and 5 of this paper brought together the findings of the research, which highlighted not only the specific needs of those young parents living in rural areas of Wales but also the positive contribution of the Youth Service had made to the lives of many of the young parents.

Despite many of the young people reporting negative feelings with regards to their experience of formal education, the overall majority of those who had since participated in Youth Work activities, commented positively on the skills they had developed, which had enabled them to re evaluate their outlook on their futures. The evidence provided demonstrates how the young parents were now broadening their

horizons; through new found confidence and belief in their own ability they were in a better position to involve themselves in the wider community.

Although many of the young parents had expressed a less than positive experience of working with other agencies, especially health professionals, the relationships they had built with Youth Workers which was based on mutual trust and respect was valued. The young parent's recognised that the usual power balance between adult and young person had diminished therefore, the transferring of skills and knowledge from both parties became a natural part of being and working together.

The feeling of belonging and group association was a significant factor for all the young parents concerned. The young parents expressed how the Youth Service by providing activities and programmes where they could join together as a group had made a substantial difference to their feeling of well being. Along with new found friendships and support from Youth Workers emotional resilience had improved and the feeling of isolation had been removed. Group work and community association had enabled the young people to recognise the importance of being able to work together. They acknowledged how individual skills could be shared and how learning could be transferred from one to another. Through this supportive environment they recognised the importance of developing social skills, the ability to communicate and being able to listen to others opinions. Youth Workers involved in the research identified an increase in co operation between members and positive social interaction as a consequence of their being involved in Youth Service programmes.

Although the young parents recognised that living in rural areas of Wales had its disadvantages and lack of opportunity and access to resources was an immediate issue. However, the research identified that these young parents were not lacking in

motivation or defeatist in their opinion of their future. Through Youth Work interaction they recognised that they were in a position to alter the direction of their lives and that of their children. They recognised that they had gained many skills which were transferable to other areas of their lives. Through Youth Work participation many of the young people developed the ability to organise their own activities for themselves and their children. They gained the confidence to look outside their communities and discover and appreciate the many opportunities rural Wales had to offer. This new found proficiency gave them the confidence to explore other aspects of their lives, access information and make important decisions for themselves.

A noticeable strand running throughout the findings is the increase in self esteem and emotional resilience of those young parents who had come into contact with the Youth Service. The majority of respondents reported experiences of prejudice and recognised the stigma associated to being a young parent. However, the young parents who were involved in the Youth Service recognised that they were no longer alone and without the power to alter their life's course. Many of the young parent's felt that Youth Work participation had made them reconsider the skills they had developed since not only becoming a young mother but also from the opportunities that had been presented to them. In terms of planning for the future: forming a strong family unit for example, or making renewed efforts to gain qualifications or enter employment the young parent's felt empowered to make these choices. They had gained the ability to readjust their goals in life and had gained a resilience that enabled them to have confidence of their ability to be a good parent and a valuable individual.

### **Implications for further research and policy and practice**

As outlined in the introduction the needs of those young parents living in rural areas of Wales has rarely been investigated. Where decisions relating to young parents have been considered the focus has been primarily on the Governments 'NEET' agenda, reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (WAG, 2010). The focus has also been firmly placed on the idea of 'cost'—moral, social and economic, with the Welsh Government recently announcing a five year plan to crack down on teenage pregnancy (FPA, 2010). However, much of the literature fails to recognise that the majority of young parent's do not regret their decision to become a mother at a slightly earlier age than the norm (Carter & Coleman, 2006). The timing of parenthood has varied, historically and culturally: parents aged under twenty have not always been seen as a 'problem' group, and are not seen in this way in all communities (Hirst & Formby, 2006). As seen from the research, young mothers viewed dedicated support as very significant. It helped them emotionally, socially and practically. They considered the support they had received from the Youth Service as invaluable, facilitating independence, autonomy and growth. The social isolation that many mothers identified in this study, caused by, for example, losing old friends once they became pregnant, often added to the importance they placed upon having friends in similar circumstances to themselves and having the support of the group and of the Youth service.

This research has identified potential research gaps that could be addressed in further detail in the future

- Understanding the specific needs of young parents living in rural areas of Britain.
- Additional work with young fathers to understand their experiences, support their needs.
- Further research into the experiences of teenage parents at the younger end of the age spectrum.

This paper also suggests the strong potential outreach work Youth Workers have to meet the needs of young parent's living in rural areas. Government needs to recognise how effectively Youth Services can support young people in making the transition from a young person to a new young parent. The facilitation of young people's social support and networks must be recognised so as to address the isolation many young parents experience.

The place of Sex and Relationships Education is vital to giving young people the confidence to talk about safer sex, and in discussing prevention and/or support for pregnancy and parenting. However, it must be recognised that the formal school setting is not always an appropriate environment for such learning to take place. Therefore, the need for policy makers to recognise Youth Works approach to learning and the importance and benefits of informal and non- formal education needs to be addressed. This form of education must be recognised as being more appropriate to many young people's learning. As Kidger (2004) argues, public policy needs to adapt broad notions of participation and of social capital, not only reduced to formal employment or education and training

In conclusion, these findings reinforce the messages that the Youth Service makes an invaluable contribution to the lives of many young people and has the potential to effectively respond to the needs of many more young people and young parents if

given the opportunity. There is no imperative for Local Authorities to provide any form of Youth Work to young parents they are only empowered to provide it as part of the service to the community. During these times of economical cutbacks, Youth Work provision can be a soft target and the needs of vulnerable young parents may be ignored which will, in the long term, be to the detriment to society as well as young people themselves. Therefore, consideration must be given to re evaluating the importance of out reach Youth Work especially in rural areas of Wales, which will establish the extent to which Youth Service involvement reduces risk and vulnerability of young parents. Only through greater stability of funding will allow the service to plan, achieve and work effectively to meet the needs of young parents in rural areas of Wales.

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