

Towards a Fife Teen Parents Strategy

This document is a stepping stone towards the creation of a Fife Teen Parents Strategy. It draws on the experiences of a number of services, particularly four projects working with teen parents in Kirkcaldy, Glenrothes, Levenmouth and Lochgelly.

This document covers six main areas:

- A brief introduction to teen parents and the issues facing them.
- An overview of the development of work with teen parents in Fife since 2009.
- “What works” in providing support to teen parents.
- The current status of work with teen parents.
- The development of a strategic context for work with teen parents.
- The development of a long-term vision.

In addition, a logic model describing work with teen parents, and the wider context for the development of a Fife Teen Parents Strategy, is set out at the end of this document.

Teen parents and the issues they face

At the moment, there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a “teen parent”. A common sense definition would include any mother or father who has a child while still in their teens. However, this literal definition is perhaps too limiting, as, for example, it takes no account of parents who may be aged 20, or even slightly older, and who may face many of the same issues. It is also likely to be limiting in the sense that young parents do not cease to be vulnerable simply because they have reached their 20th birthday. As will be set out later, one of the pieces of work which is currently being carried out by Fife Gingerbread and Barnardo’s is to develop and agree a definition of “teen parent” which ensures that young people who share common difficulties can access appropriate forms of support.

Although teen parents are nominally united by their age and status as parents, in reality there are very wide differences in their circumstances. Teen parents are not a homogenous group. As with any group, some teen parents will face fewer difficulties than others. Some, for example, may not face financial pressures, or may have parents and grandparents living close by to provide full-time, free childcare. Some may be self-confident, and be able to identify and seek out any support they require. Many, however, will not. Over the last five years, the four teen parent projects operating in Fife have worked with hundreds of young mums and dozens of young dads who have faced significant difficulties in many areas of their lives.

The issues facing teen parents can be thought of as falling into three main groups:

- Issues common to most or all parents.
- Issues common to most or all parents, but exacerbated by the status of being a teen parent.

- Issues specific to being a teen parent.

There are a wide variety of areas in which teen parents face many of the same issues as other parents. Examples of this might include ill-health both among parents and their children, or the difficulties caused by rural isolation. Feedback from teen parents, as well as other groups such as lone parents, suggests that there is still a lack of affordable wraparound childcare to support access to employment and training. Teen mums, in common with mums from many other groups, might also face difficulties in terms of being estranged from, or receiving little support from their child's father.

For many teen parents, as well as parents generally, poverty and financial hardship is an everyday issue. In many cases, however, this is exacerbated by issues which are particular to teen parents. For example:

- Most teen parents are unlikely to have worked, or to have built up any savings.
- A significant number of teen parents do not have their own homes, and many live in unsatisfactory housing circumstances.
- As a group, teen parents face particular barriers which make it difficult for them to access work or education and so improve their circumstances.
- Many lack self-confidence, self-esteem and may have a poor sense of self-worth.

Over the last five years, partners in Fife have carried out a number of pieces of research which have identified many of the specific issues facing teen parents. A number of these are summarised in the bullet points below:

- As a group, teen parents face significant levels of stigma in the media, among politicians, and more widely in their communities.
- They face isolation from friends and sometimes from their family.
- Disconnection from social and support networks is a consistent theme particularly among young mothers in the months following the birth of their child.
- Many lack confidence, self-worth, and self-belief.
- For some, there is a lack of motivation and sense of purpose.
- Many teen parents are unaware of the support services which may be available to them, and often do not come into contact with those who might refer or signpost them.
- Increasingly, changes to the benefits system have significantly impacted on teen parents and made their financial circumstances worse. The recently mooted suggestion from the UK government that housing benefit would be withdrawn from young people aged under 25, for example, would have a very significant impact on this group.

Similarly, although it may take some time for the full effects to be felt, the under-occupancy rule or "bedroom tax" is also likely to have a significant and detrimental

impact on teen parents. This is likely to be exacerbated by the increasing difficulties that low income families face generally in securing private lets. For obvious reasons, teen parents are highly unlikely to be able to access a mortgage, and there are very limited levels of social housing available. This is likely to mean that teen parents as a group will be squeezed from both ends. They will be competing with many others for the relatively small number of one-bedroom private lets, and there are clear indications that many landlords are unlikely to favour teen parents over other groups, and may view them as high risk tenants.

However, in the absence of secure housing, teen parents would find it difficult to take the steps necessary to become sufficiently financially independent to secure any other form of housing. The practical consequence of this is that many teen parents and their children are likely, without any other initiatives, to find themselves remaining in unsuitable housing circumstances.

Perhaps most significant is a consistent finding that services are effectively “teen parent-blind”. Many lack awareness of the issues facing teen parents, and have little conception of the difficulties that many face in accessing support. There have been many examples identified by workers of an assumption that “one size fits all parents”, with a lack of recognition of the need to provide services or support which are age, and circumstance-appropriate.

All of these issues have a wide range of consequences for teen parents and their children. Among these are that:

- Teen parents exhibit high levels of unemployment and low levels of economic activity.
- As a group, teen parents show a lack of engagement with higher and further education.
- Many teen parents face periods of mental ill-health, particularly in relation to depression.

However, there are also longer term concerns. There is a recognition across government that young people who do not gain qualifications and work experience at a relatively early age face the risk of longer term social exclusion and poverty. Clearly, for the reasons set out above, teen parents are at particular risk of this. At a personal level, it is clear from many of the teen parents who have worked with the existing projects in Fife that there is a significant risk that they will not reach their potential in terms of education or employment. At the level of the wider economy, it is clearly inefficient that many young people who are capable of making a significant contribution to the labour market (and to the Exchequer) are prevented from doing so.

There are also risks in relation to the children of teen parents. It would be wrong to generalise (as some in the media do) that “teen parent = poor parent”, as there are many examples of young people working with projects in Fife who are excellent parents. The issue is more complex than parenting per se. Because many teen parents are isolated from their families, they do not have access to much of the ready advice and role models that might be available to other parents. Similarly, the benefits of early socialisation for children are well-documented. However, given the

levels of isolation that many teen parents face, their children often have only limited experience of interaction with others before attending nursery for the first time.

It is clear from the experience of the projects in Fife that none of these issues is inevitable or irreversible. One of the key benefits of a Fife Teen Parents Strategy would be that the good practice model developed through the existing projects would be available on a much wider basis. This would help to ensure that, at relatively low cost, many of these short and longer term risks for young people and their children would be ameliorated.

History of work with teen parents

It is only relatively recently that there has been any recognition that teen parents are a significant group facing specific issues. There were small pockets of work in the past of relevance to this group, particularly one-to-one support provided by Fife Council for school age children through the period of their pregnancy and subsequent return to school, as well as educational work by the Council and NHS Fife to try to reduce Fife's historically high rate of teenage pregnancies. However, prior to 2009, there was little no specific work being undertaken with post-school age young parents.

In 2009, a number of partners in Levenmouth, operating under the auspices of the Fife Health and Well-being Alliance did some groundbreaking exploratory work with young parents to try to identify the kinds of issues they face, and what sorts of services might help them to address these.

Largely as a result of that work, and subsequent work involving other partners in other towns, there is now a much better recognition that, as a group, post-school teen parents are largely hidden, and often invisible to services. A number of issues have been significant:

- The group has lacked a “champion”.
- As a group, they have rarely commanded a high priority in strategies, action plans etc.
- Individually, teen parents have rarely been assessed as being in sufficient need to qualify for direct social work support, but this has arguably meant that there has been a lack of focus on preventative, early interventions.
- Service providers have lacked understanding of the issues facing them, and, as result, services have rarely been “tuned” to teen parents’ needs.
- This was exacerbated by isolation and arguably a lack of “worldly wisdom” or experience among teen parents themselves.

There are very clear parallels between these issues and the development of services to support lone parents. As recently as 10 years ago, many of these same statements could have been made about lone parents. However, the work of Fife Gingerbread and its partners, and the significant support achieved through public sector and Big Lottery funding, has transformed both the perception of lone parent issues, and the extent to which services are meeting their needs. As will be clear

later, a number of the lessons arising from this developmental work on behalf of lone parents have been significant in helping to develop the emerging work with teen parents.

Since 2009, there have been four projects working with teen parents in:

- Levenmouth.
- Kirkcaldy.
- Glenrothes.
- Lochgelly.

The projects are currently funded only until March 2015. After this date, there is clearly a risk that that work with teen parents beyond school age will cease.

What we know about work with teen parents

One of the clear advantages of the work that has been undertaken with teen parents over the last five years has been that a great deal of knowledge and experience has built up, both at the level of individual workers, and among the partners involved in managing and supporting the projects. This section draws together (in bullet point form) a flavour of this learning in the form of “what works” in specific support and development work with teen parents.

At a basic level, there is a need for support which:

- Is based on trust.
- Is client-led and responsive to assets and needs.
- Delivers promises.
- Is relationship-based.
- Shows clear understanding of the issues.
- Is empathic.
- Shows patience and persistence.
- Is resourceful and creative.
- Is pitched at the “right” level.
- Is age-appropriate.
- Supports mums.
- Supports children.
- Supports dads.
- Promotes peer support.

It is critical that support focuses on key issues for teen parents such as:

- Confidence and self-esteem.
- Empowerment.
- Communication skills.
- Building family and peer support networks.
- Parenting.
- Budgeting and managing money.
- Understanding the systems of support.

- Giving “me” time to parents

It can be delivered in any or all of the following ways, depending on the needs and circumstances of the families:

- On a one-to-one basis.
- On a group basis.
- For mums only, for dads only, or for both together.
- For parents alone, or for parents and children together.
- On a face to face basis or by telephone.
- By a worker, through peer support, or both.
- By male and/or female workers as appropriate.
- For a discrete period, or open-ended.

The support, regardless of format, needs to be underpinned by being:

- Available locally.
- Appropriately timed to take account of life circumstances.
- Supported by a crèche and transport.
- Free to use.
- Informal and fun.

Perhaps the key lesson is that work with teen parents cannot exist, or more properly, cannot be effective in isolation. Teen parent projects need to work with others who can provide essential support, either through joint working (e.g. through sessions embedded in a teen parent programme), or through onward referral. These services include:

- Health visitors and staff from the Family Nurse Partnership.
- GP surgeries.
- Social work.
- Family centres.
- Fife Council local offices.
- CARF and others who can provide advice.
- Housing advice and service providers.
- Job Centre Plus.
- Colleges.

There are also a range of other types of services which can be critical for individual teen parents. Among these are:

- Voluntary sector providers such as Barnardo’s through its Mellow Bumps and Mellow Parenting projects.
- Organisations of and for parents of children with specific conditions or diseases, such as Enable, Aberlour, or organisations working with children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

- Organisations who can support parents experiencing, for example, mental health problems, substance misuse problems or those whose lives are in chaos, or who may be homeless.

The current status of work with teen parents

At present, work with teen parents is at a crossroads.

- There are four projects, each small, working with teen parents in single localities.
- The proportion of teen parents across Fife who can access services is small.
- Although each of the projects is itself overseen by a multi-agency partnership, and each is managed by Fife Gingerbread (solely, or in conjunction with a partner), there is no strategic group setting a direction for the work across Fife.
- Each of the projects is time-limited, and there is a real risk that, after March 2015, there will be no work with teen parents in Fife.
- There is no evidence that the issues facing teen parents individually or as a group will be remedied without specific interventions.
- There are a number of changes underway, particularly in relation to benefits, which are likely to make the situation worse for many teen parents.

For these reasons, it is suggested that there is need for the development of a Fife-wide, multi-agency approach to work with teen parents.

The remainder of this document focuses on two main areas:

- The steps necessary in the next 12 – 18 months to develop the groundwork for ongoing work with teen parents.
- The development of long term outcomes for work with teen parents.

The development of a strategic context for work with teen parents

There are a number of pieces of work which will be necessary over the next 12 to 18 months to put in place the groundwork necessary for longer term interventions with teen parents.

At the heart of this, there is a need for the development and agreement of a “Fife Teen Parents Strategy”. To be fully effective, this will need to be developed on a multi-agency basis, and be owned by all of the organisations working with, or on behalf of teen parents. However, there are a number of steps which will be necessary before this can be developed. These are detailed in the following paragraphs.

- a) There is a need for a **shared definition of “teen parent”**. At the moment, for pragmatic reasons, the definition has been kept

loose, in order to make sure that anybody who would not otherwise be covered by suitable services can be supported by teen parent projects. However, this is not sustainable in the longer term, and an agreed definition will be required. This is currently being developed in draft form by Fife Gingerbread and Barnardo's.

- b) There is a need for a **“teen parent support model”** to be codified and agreed. At present, there are four projects working in Central and West Fife. However, to be fully effective there need to be projects working across Fife. In order that these are implemented as efficiently and effectively as possible, there is a need for a standard model which can be easily deployed in any location, with some adaptation made for specific local circumstances (for example in relation to joint working with initiatives already at that location). Earlier in this document, the findings to date in relation to “what works” in specific support and development work with teen parents were set out. This should provide a good basis for the development of a model.
- c) Alongside the development of a model, there is a need to research and develop effective **tools for monitoring and evaluating** work with lone parents. This should encompass a standard assets and needs assessment, and the development and agreement of indicators of progress (for example, in relation to issues such as self-confidence and parents' well-being, but also in relation to wider issues such as children's socialisation and reductions in the levels of social isolation).
- d) In due course, once the model is established, there will be a need for **good practice guidance** to be available for those working with teen parents. Alongside this, there is potential to develop, for example, self-assessment tools to identify whether the provision supports good practice.
- e) There is a need for a **“Fife Teen Parent Steering Group”**. At the moment, each of the four projects has its own management structure, and there is no Fife-wide strategic group looking at work with teen parents. This group needs to take ownership of the development of the definition, the support model, and in time, the strategy.
- f) In parallel with the identification of a steering group, there is a need for the identification of **“teen parent champions”** in key organisations. This is an approach that worked particularly well in Levenmouth, where the participating partners took responsibility for ensuring that their services interacted effectively with the project. As the work expands to encompass the whole of Fife, it would make sense to have champions in each of the key

organisations, who can ensure that key messages in relation to teen parents are disseminated widely and consistently.

- g) Alongside this, there will be a need for **further developments to services** to recognise and address the needs of teen parents.
- h) At present, Fife Gingerbread has been largely responsible for taking forward work with teen parents. This has made sense to date, as there are significant commonalities between the issues facing both lone parents and teen parents. It is suggested that one of the earliest tasks of the steering group should be to identify a **“teen parent lead organisation”**.
- i) Overarching all of this work, there is a need for the development of a **“Fife Teen Parents Strategy”**.
- j) As part of the development of the strategy, there will be a need to look at issues such as outcomes and indicators, and **how work with teen parents can be made sustainable** over the long term. There is some urgency related to this as the current projects have only limited funding available to them, and none beyond March 2015.

The development of longer term outcomes

The development and agreement of longer term outcomes for work with teen parents will clearly be the responsibility of the steering group, and central to the development of the strategy. However, in concluding this document, it is worth reflecting on what some of these medium and long-term outcomes might be. The bullet points below are drawn from the findings of a workshop held with current teen parent workers, and a number of key stakeholders from relevant organisations across Fife. They are by no means definitive, but represent a first step in identifying what a future for teen parents in Fife could look like. The outcomes include that:

- Teen parents have equality on the same basis as any other parent, and barriers to this have been identified and addressed.
- Teen parents do not face stigma in the media, from politicians or in their local communities.
- The children of teen parents can achieve their aspirations on the same basis as any other child.
- Services for teen parents are mainstreamed, and support is provided appropriately.
- There is a sound level of knowledge and understanding of the issues facing teen parents among staff and policy makers.
- Teen parents have access to choice and opportunities in education, employment, housing and other key aspects of their lives.
- Young people are made aware of the nature of teen parenthood and the issues teen parents face, and can make informed choices about their future, with a reduction in teenage pregnancy.

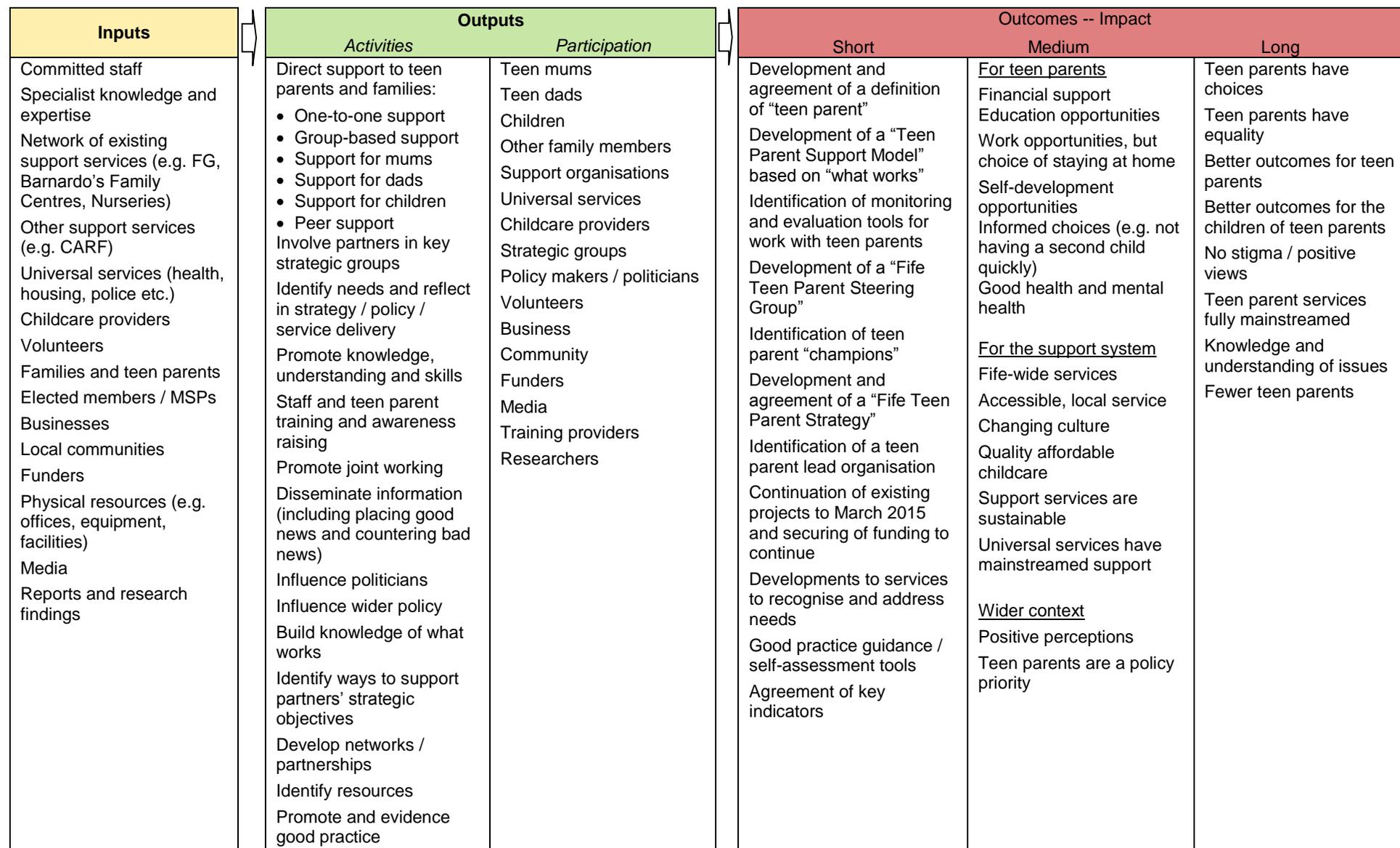
Within each of these outcomes, there will be a range of indicators to measure progress.

In essence, the longer term goal is that there should be better outcomes overall for teen parents, and better outcomes for their children. Those who attended the workshop reflected on some of the changes that will be necessary for these outcomes to be achieved. These include that there will need to be:

- Services available on a consistent basis across Fife to support teen parents.
- Services which are accessible, and continue to be free at the point of use.
- A culture change in services in Fife, with the development of knowledge and understanding about teen parent issues.
- Quality, affordable childcare available for teen parents.
- Work with the media, politicians and policy makers, to make sure that the negative perceptions currently held about teen parents are challenged and reversed.
- Work with employers and colleges, to make sure that the work and learning environments are supportive of, and appropriate for teen parents.
- Access for teen parents to the levels of financial and other support necessary for them to ensure that they, and their children can achieve their full potential.

All of these requirements can form the basis of the development of a Teen Parents Strategy in Fife. The Strategy can build on the work undertaken to date, and provide a sound basis for the achievement of the types of outcomes identified.

Fife Teen Parent Project Logic Model



Assumptions

There is a willingness among policy makers and strategic partners to support teen parents.

External Factors

Funding reductions. Welfare reform. Loss of housing benefit for under 25s. Media perceptions. Stigma among community, press and politicians. Risks of poor outcomes for children (inc imprisonment). Early Years Collective. Attitudes in services. Independence.