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Sally Dench, Anne Bellis

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Learning for Young Mothers

A qualitative study of flexible provision

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Executive Summary

This report looks at a range of different types of learning provision being accessed by young mothers. The types of provision include those run specifically for young mothers by, and in, a variety of organisations, as well as mainstream courses in FE colleges. Some cater for those who are still of compulsory school age, others for those who are beyond this age, and a few are available to both age groups. This study was conducted as part of the overall evaluation of Care to Learn. The aim was to explore how learning provision for young mothers is delivered and developed, the issues around its set-up and longer-term survival, the impact it has on young mothers, and what it is about particular types of provision that suited these young women.

Young fathers are eligible for Care to Learn funding as long as they have the main caring responsibility for their child. In practice, this means that young fathers rarely apply – in 2004/05, five young fathers received this funding; in 2005/06, 12; and 20 in the 2006/07 academic year. There are many issues for young fathers, and in some areas there are projects or particular professionals who work with them. However, most of the concern about long-term social and economic exclusion surrounds teenage mothers. They nearly always have the main caring responsibility for their child, and in many cases the father is no longer, or only tangentially involved. This study therefore focused on provision and support for teenage mothers.

Interviews were conducted in 12 types of learning provision. A total of 17 professionals working with young mothers, and 68 young mothers ranging in age from 14 years to the early 20s, were interviewed. Interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2006.

Characteristics of learning provision

The sample covered a wide range of learning providers and other agencies, including statutory, voluntary and private organisations in different regions of England.

The learning providers fell broadly into three categories:

- Those working with young mothers and pregnant girls under the statutory school leaving age to enable them to continue in full-time education, namely a Pupil Referral Unit, a Home and Hospital Education Service, a local authority Reintegration Service, and a Young Mothers to Be course run by a large national charity.
- Those who had developed specific initiatives for post-16 young mothers to encourage re-engagement in education or training – programmes run by Sure Start, Connexions, local and national voluntary organisations, a FE college, and an adult education centre.
- Those whose main focus was on supporting access for post-16 year old young mothers to mainstream education and training, and on working with FE colleges to develop more flexible forms of provision – local authority reintegration officers, Connexions Personal Advisers and FE college staff.

Despite the diversity of provision, a number of common themes emerge:

- The importance of a holistic approach to learning was emphasised – addressing the broader lives of the young mothers and helping them to address a range of personal and practical problems.
- The curriculum needs to be tailored to the needs of the client group – for example, providing a varied curriculum related to their position as a young mother, embedding literacy and numeracy in everyday activities, and allowing flexibility for the curriculum to evolve depending on the characteristics of each group.
- A friendly environment and informal approach to learning is important.
- Accredited learning should be provided. A number of young mothers had not done well at school and never achieved any qualifications. Accredited learning helped develop their confidence in themselves and also gave them evidence to use to move on to further learning or employment.
- Free on-site childcare and other forms of learner support were key. Care to Learn was paying for the majority of childcare and was very important in the running of these provisions.
- Professionals working with young mothers through these provisions were also providing advice and support to facilitate progression into further learning.
- Partnership working and linking into local strategies is crucial in addressing the needs of young mothers.

Previous activities

The previous experiences of these young mothers varied considerably. Those who were under statutory school leaving age should, by definition, have been in school. While some had been and had attended regularly, others however had done what they could to avoid attending or had only attended on an irregular basis.

The majority of those who had did not already have a baby by the age of 16 had found a job or started a college course on leaving school. However, this was not always a stable position. The majority of jobs entered were fairly basic, in that they did not offer many, if any, career opportunities and were relatively low paid. It did not take much for a young woman to leave the job or course she was on. Sometimes this was due to pregnancy. However, others were beginning to demonstrate a pattern of job and/or course change before becoming pregnant. The reasons for this include a combination of attitudes and motivations of young people, but also the limited opportunities (particularly jobs) open to them. A number reported that they simply stopped going to college or left their job when they found they were pregnant.

In other cases, a young woman had either lost her job or been asked to leave a college course once she became pregnant.

Deciding to attend the current learning

The reasons for attending their current learning activity were very mixed. Some had very clear views about wanting to obtain qualifications and to find good employment. A proportion of these were interviewed on an FE course rather than specific provision for young mothers. Those attending one of the forms of specific provision were doing so to prepare them to attend college or to fill in time.

Those of statutory school age did not really have a choice about being in education. However, where there were alternatives to attending school they did have a choice about where they studied. A number of these young mothers, if allowed, would not have stayed in education through choice.

Those attending specific provision for young mothers who were above the statutory school leaving age reported varying motivations for attending, and often a combination of these applied. They had been persuaded, or as reported by some: 'dragged there', often by a support worker but sometimes by family or friends. Personal contacts and being told about the provision was an important motivator. They wanted to mix with others in a similar position to themselves; they were bored at home. A few had been pushed out of mainstream provision on becoming pregnant and wanted to stay engaged in something.

Views on these courses

However, once there, the majority reported that they enjoyed the various forms of provision and felt that they were gaining from attending.

The aspects they particularly valued were:

- the relaxed and informal atmosphere and regimes.
- the availability of support and advice – this was crucial to the majority of young women interviewed, and they valued the rapport built up with and understanding of support workers.
- the curriculum – this often covered topics of direct relevance to the lives of young mothers, while also enhancing their basic skills and providing vocational or academic lessons as well.
- teaching styles – the young mothers valued working in small groups, the more relaxed pace of work, the facilitating and involving styles often used in these forms of learning provision. Some were dyslexic and this had either been missed or ignored while they were at school.
- having a break and time for themselves, away from their child.
- being with others who understand their situation and do not judge them due to their being a young mother.
- access to childcare.
- the contribution that this provision made to improving individual's confidence and motivation; helping them to realise that they can achieve and progress.

The main difficulties experienced by young mothers attending these courses were around transport. This was sometimes cost, although most providers were helping with these, but more often related to the logistics of travelling on public transport. Taking a young baby and buggy on a bus, possibly having to make one or more changes, is not straightforward.

Other difficulties mostly related to studying on mainstream courses, eg at an FE college. Issues mentioned included: covering the additional costs of learning, eg equipment, books, etc.; making time for private study; the lack of flexibility in some colleges, or departments within a college, eg relating to attendance levels and absence.

Attitudes to school

Some of the young mothers had enjoyed school and always, or usually attended. The sample included those who had done well in their GCSEs.

However, the majority interviewed were, or had been, not so keen on school. This disengagement from school often began before they became pregnant, although some did report initial factors related to their pregnancy. A few had such poor attendance, and often such poor behaviour records, that they had been expelled.

The reasons for not liking school included: not liking the discipline and overall formal structures; not getting on with teachers; feeling that teachers were not understanding of personal and family difficulties they were having to cope with; personality clashes and not getting on with other pupils. Being bullied was also mentioned by a small minority.

Childcare

The majority of young mothers interviewed were using Care to Learn to fund childcare while they were on their course. One provision run by a voluntary organisation was accessing alternative funding. A few of the young mothers had family members looking after their child (not funded by Care to Learn).

One point that emerges is that not all the young mothers fully realised that Care to Learn was funding their childcare. They had received help in completing an application form and might not have sent the form off themselves.

Many of the young women had no previous experience of using childcare and nearly all had been reluctant initially to leave their child with strangers. However, those running these courses and other support workers had often helped to reassure them, and helped them to find suitable care.

Some courses had childcare on-site. During the first few weeks, the young mothers had constantly looked in to see how their child was doing. They soon stopped doing this once their child had settled and they had been reassured themselves that everything was fine.

The majority of young mothers had relaxed over time, and become very positive about using childcare. They welcomed the break from their child, while being sure that their child was safe. They came to realise that if there was a problem of any sort, eg the child became ill, the childcarer would contact them. They found that their abilities as a mother were not being judged and that childcare providers treated them with respect as a mother. Several commented positively on the benefits to their child of being in childcare, in terms of socialising and learning.

Future plans

The young mothers interviewed varied considerably in the extent to which they had clear ambitions for the future. For some, more immediate practical issues were

foremost in their minds and a number wanted to be a full-time mother until their child was older.

However, many were clear that they wanted to do something with their lives that would help their child(ren). Although by no means all wanted to continue or remain in learning, there was a strong element of being interested in further learning. Those running courses and supporting the young mothers more generally commented on how they noticed an increased interest in learning as the young mothers attending progressed through the course.

Barriers to further learning included: paying for and accessing childcare (especially if too old to qualify for Care to Learn); needing on-going support to keep them motivated and address any issues that arose once they entered mainstream learning; juggling being a mother and studying; the extent to which some learning providers understand the lives of young mothers and are prepared to be flexible. The attitudes of family and partners could also be a barrier – in some communities it is expected that mothers stay at home with their child.

Discussion and conclusions

The last chapter discusses a number of themes emerging from this study:

- The key importance of advice and support.
- The need for varied provision to address the needs of a range of young mothers.
- The importance of a curriculum and learning environment that applies to those disengaged from formal education.
- The existence of on-going barriers to learning.
- The lack of long-term funding for many successful forms of learning provision.
- The key importance of Care to Learn in funding childcare while young mothers are in a range of different types of learning.

1 Introduction

This report looks at a range of different types of learning provision being accessed by young mothers. The types of provision included those run specifically for young mothers by, and in a variety of organisations, as well as mainstream courses in further education (FE) colleges. Some cater for those who were still of statutory school age, others for those who are beyond the age of compulsory schooling, and a few are available to both age groups. This study was conducted as part of the overall evaluation of Care to Learn. The aim was to explore how learning provision for young mothers was delivered and developed, the issues around its set-up and longer-term survival, the impact it had on young mothers, and what it was about particular types of provision that suited these young women.

Young fathers are eligible to access Care to Learn funding as long as they have the main caring responsibility for their child. In practice, this means that young fathers rarely apply – in 2004/05, five young fathers received this funding; in 2005/06, 12; and 20 in the 2006/07 academic year. There are many issues for young fathers, and in some areas there are projects or particular professionals who work with them. However, most of the concerns about long-term social and economic exclusion surround teenage mothers. They nearly always have the main caring responsibility for their child, and in many cases the father is no longer, or only tangentially, involved. This study therefore focused on provision and support for teenage mothers.

A mini-case study approach was adopted, and interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2006. Twelve forms of learning provision were selected. One, sometimes two (and in one case four) support workers were interviewed at each, giving a total of 17. These included Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs), Sure Start advisers, reintegration officers and course co-ordinators. At all but one of the provisions, some of the young mothers attending were interviewed (no young mothers were interviewed from the home tutoring provision). The majority of these interviews with young mothers were through focus groups, although in a few cases one-to-one interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted with 68 young mothers, with the groups ranging in size from four to 15. The youngest was 14 and the oldest were in their early 20s.

The learning provision was selected to include a range of different types of geographical location, a range of different types of provider (eg colleges, voluntary and community organisations), those catering for various age ranges, mainstream provision and courses specifically aimed at young mothers. There is a growing provision for pregnant young women, and this was also included. In many cases such provision is available to young mothers as well.

The rest of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 looks at the nature of the various types of learning provision.
- Chapter 3 explores key features that are important in the provision of learning for young mothers.
- Chapter 4 discusses, from the perspective of young mothers, their recent and current learning activities.
- Chapter 5 reports their views of the courses they were attending, and the provision of advice and support.
- Chapter 6 looks at the attitudes of these young mothers to school.
- Chapter 7 explores the use of childcare.
- Chapter 8 discusses their future plans and barriers to (further) learning.
- Finally, Chapter 9 provides a discussion of the main themes emerging from this study.

2 Characteristics of the Learning Provision

2.1 Introduction

The sample covered a wide range of learning providers and other agencies, including statutory, voluntary and private organisations in different regions of England. The aim was to illustrate the diversity of organisations identifying young mothers as a key target group, and to identify a range of interventions and support.

The learning providers fell broadly into three categories:

- Those working with young mothers and pregnant girls under the school leaving age to enable them to continue in full-time education (pupil referral unit (PRU), Home and Hospital Education Service (HHES), and local authority Reintegration Service).
- Those who had developed special initiatives for post-16 young mothers to encourage re-engagement in education or training (Sure Start, Connexions, voluntary organisations, a vocational training provider, and an adult education centre).
- Those whose main focus was on supporting access for post-16 young mothers to mainstream education and training, and on working with providers (mainly FE colleges) to develop more flexible forms of provision (local authority Reintegration Officers, Connexions PAs, FE college staff).

A profile is presented below of these specialised interventions for young mothers and of the organisations offering this form of provision.

All except one (the church-based community project) were accessing Care to Learn funding for young mothers who were eligible, ie who were in the relevant age range and using formal childcare. This community project was drawing on alternative funding to provide free childcare for the young mothers attending.

2.2 Provision to support under-16 young mothers in full-time education

2.2.1 Pupil Referral Unit

The unit was funded by the Local Authority (LA) and offered educational provision to pregnant schoolgirls and young mothers below the statutory school leaving age who were resident within the local authority area. Although the main aim was to keep the young mothers within mainstream schooling, they could be sent to the PRU as an alternative, where they could continue to study for GCSEs and other accredited learning. The unit had been in existence for about 25 years and had a well-established reputation with local schools. It was recognised that young mothers with poor school attendance could progress much better at the unit and many achieved good GCSE results.

The PRU offered a range of flexible options to young mothers including intensive learning support, GCSEs across a wide range of subjects, an alternative curriculum (eg keep-fit classes), on-site childcare provision, payment of travel costs, and home tutoring where appropriate. Not all the teaching was provided on-site. Some young mothers returned to the school they previously attended for specific lessons. Pupils could be self-referred, referred by their school or by a support worker. Those with personal and other problems also received the benefit of a support worker. At the time of our visit, there were 11 students on the roll, although this number would rise over the academic year. The majority were either Year 11 or repeating Year 11.

Not all areas have PRUs specifically aimed at young mothers. They are more usually aimed at young people who persistently truant and/or have behavioural problems – sometimes called the ‘naughty unit’. Throughout the evaluation of Care to Learn, where PRUs specifically for pregnant teenagers and young mothers have been visited, the provision has been found to be effectively engaging this group in education. They are however expensive to run and often under threat when local authority funding is tight.

2.2.2 Hospital and Home Education Service (HHES)

The work of the HHES falls within the broader framework of the government’s Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and its role is to ensure the continuity of educational provision for young people unable to attend school for medical reasons, including pregnancy and childbirth.

In one of our case study areas, the HHES was seen to be making a key contribution to addressing the high levels of teenage pregnancy by providing profiling data on a number of known risk factors for teenage pregnancy, such as low attainment, poor

school attendance and family, emotional and behavioural problems. The information would be used for better targeting of interventions to support the most vulnerable groups of young people.

One of the key workers interviewed (a Reintegration Officer) confirmed that the main aim of the service was to support the education of school-aged pregnant girls and young mothers, and to try to keep them within the mainstream school system. She also commissioned staff to provide outreach education during the period when they could not be in school, ie around the time of giving birth. There were typically 55 to 60 young mothers on the caseload in an academic year. Referrals mainly came through schools and health professionals working with pregnant teenagers. There was a range of support available including: support for various problems encountered, such as housing, benefits, childcare, school attendance; liaising with other professionals working with the young women, eg midwives, teachers, Connexions PAs; monitoring the progress of pregnant young women and keeping in contact with them; arranging alternative forms of provision for non-attenders (for example home tutoring and support groups); developing education plans with young women and their families; raising awareness of school staff about the needs of young mothers.

The provision described in Section 2.3.4 below was also aimed at those of statutory school age, as well as those aged over 16.

2.3 Special initiatives to re-engage young mothers aged over 16 in education and training

There are a number of initiatives across the country which are targeted at young mothers and pregnant young women beyond statutory school leaving age, with the aim of encouraging their continued participation in education and training. A sample of special initiatives was included in this research. These were being offered by a variety of providers including: Sure Start, Connexions, two large national charities, two smaller voluntary organisations, a large vocational training provider, and an adult education centre.

2.3.1 Sure Start and Connexions: Young Parents' Group

Through Sure Start local programmes and Children's Centres a number of services were offered to local families living in areas of high deprivation, such as family support and guidance, play sessions, mother and toddler groups, social activities, respite care and mothering skills. As in other areas, Connexions had been working in partnership with Sure Start and other agencies within the overall remit of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, and a post of Teenage Parent Adviser (TPA) had been created because of the high rates of teenage pregnancy in this particular area. The TPA had about 60 young mothers on her caseload at the time.

One illustration of this partnership approach was the setting up of a Young Parents' Group targeted at young mothers under the age of 20, which was facilitated jointly by the Connexions TPA and a Sure Start family support worker. The initiative was funded by Sure Start. Ten young mothers were attending the group which had been running for about a year. They were taking part in a range of activities: sessions on parenting skills, cooking, music, art, photography; talks on sexual health, drugs and alcohol; and social activities. There was an on-site crèche, but also a strong emphasis on mother-child interaction in some of the sessions. A Training and Employment Co-ordinator was available to offer advice and support on training and employment opportunities.

The Connexions TPA was also working with the young mothers on a one-to-one basis with the long-term aim of helping them into education, training or employment. She took them along to local colleges and ran sessions to help build their confidence. She felt that the Young Parents' Group provided a productive forum to tackle many of the issues faced by young mothers and was a useful way of focusing their attention on education and training.

The local Connexions service had recently accessed external funding to run some accredited short courses for teenage mothers in IT, maths, English and alternative therapies. The courses would aim to improve their confidence and skills, with an on-site crèche provided. The respondent felt that young mothers needed a tailored approach of this kind, which would hopefully act as a stepping stone into mainstream learning in the future.

2.3.2 YWCA Women's Centre

YWCA is a national charity with 14 centres in England and Wales, offering over 140 programmes to 'young women facing poverty, discrimination or abuse'.¹ Young mothers are a key target group for the YWCA, and the Women's Centre visited was typical in offering services such as support, information, advice and guidance, education courses, social activities, outreach, and an on-site crèche. About 60 to 70 young women had accessed services in this centre over the course of a year. The target age range was 16 to 25 years, although the core group of young mothers who attended were aged 18 to 22. Typically, attendance would be built up over time – many were attending every day or several times a week. Referrals came from Connexions PAs, community midwives, health visitors, social workers and staff working with young women in care. Various training courses had been offered over the previous two years, mainly 'Young Mums To Be' (YMTB) and 'Wise Up' personal development courses (both accredited), basic and key skills. There was a computer suite offering access to IT and the internet. Young mothers at the centre had also

¹ www.ywca-gb.org.uk

participated in a national YWCA research programme which addressed issues of sexuality and sexual relationships. The young mothers at the Women's Centre had designed a questionnaire exploring young people's views and experiences of sex education in schools and findings from the research would be shared locally with their school and community nurse.

Funding for these various activities came from a number of sources including local funding, trusts and donors, the Mothering Fund and the Lottery Fund. There was also support from the YWCA national fundraising team. Care to Learn funding was accessed for those within the eligible age group.

2.3.3 National vocational training provider

As part of the research, an inner-city training centre was visited where the training provider had been established for over 20 years. This organisation was a large national provider of work-based learning and vocational training, with over 40 centres across the UK; although in the private sector, the majority of its provision was funded through government contracts. The organisation offered a range of vocational training programmes to young people and adults including Entry to Employment (E2E), apprenticeships, New Deal, Gateway to Work and Train to Gain. Trainees could gain NVQs in administration, customer service, retail, childcare, management, IT or warehousing. There were also key skills and basic skills programmes. The number of trainees attending the centre is usually around 100 to 120.

The centre delivered a large E2E programme (funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC)), which included a YMTB course for pregnant women aged 16 to 19 years. The centre had been running the YMTB programme for about six years. This programme is available from a range of providers around the country, indicating that it can be adapted to take place in a range of different settings and through different modes of delivery. The programme focuses on personal development, confidence building, health education, mothering skills, basic and key skills, and employability skills, and offers an NCFE¹ qualification. There were typically 20 to 25 young women on the programme at any one time with this provider. The approach was informal, with learning taking place in small groups with a great deal of one-to-one support.

Staff at the centre had developed a moving-on plan for staying in touch with the young mothers after having their babies, and there were 'incentive bonuses' for those returning to education or going into employment. According to the tutor, the majority of those who have taken the course later went on into further education or employment.

¹ Previously known as the Northern Council for Further Education, this awarding body now has a national focus and is known as NCFE.

2.3.4 Large national charity

In addition to the YWCA, provision by another large national charity was visited. This organisation delivers a number of different projects in disadvantaged communities across the country, particularly targeted at young people not involved in any form of employment or training.

At the site visited, a YMTB course was being provided for young women who were pregnant or who were young mothers up to the age of 19. The YMTB course provided an NCFE accredited qualification equivalent to NVQ level 1. In addition, the young women attending could take qualifications in basic skills and IT, and some were attending a few lessons at a school. Accredited and non-accredited short courses on topics such as health and safety at work, basic food hygiene, paediatric first aid, baby signing and baby massage were also available from time to time.

Where someone attending was of statutory school age, the charity invoices their previous school to cover the costs. The charity funds those beyond statutory school age themselves, and these young women were also eligible to apply for Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) funding.

The young women attending this course were provided with considerable amounts of support. The Reintegration Officer was key in engaging in this course those who would, or could, not remain in, or return to, school. In addition, there was a specialist childcare adviser, a community worker, midwife and health visitor, all regularly attending and able to provide one-to-one support on a range of issues.

Progressing on to further education, training or employment was a key focus of this course. The young women were encouraged to remain engaged following completion of the course and given support in doing so. The Reintegration Officer would often be involved in helping young mothers who continued with their education, for example mediating between them and other learning providers.

2.3.5 Regionally based voluntary organisation

This organisation offered learning opportunities and support to young parents and their children. It was established as a charity in 1992, with the aim of supporting family learning activities in the region which fell outside the LA remit. The organisation was working mainly through a Millennium Volunteers contract run in partnership with Connexions. Their main focus was to engage young mothers and other young people in voluntary activity. The main target groups were young mothers and young pregnant women aged 16 to 25 and their children with a particular focus on the 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) group. They had worked with over 600 young people over the previous five years, nearly 90 per cent of whom were young mothers. Provision included an accredited personal development/mothering skills courses for young mothers under 19, funded by the

LSC and Care to Learn. This focused on confidence and skills-building and re-engagement with learning. The courses were delivered in community-based venues across the region, making use of mobile crèches.

Alongside this provision, the Millennium Volunteers programme encouraged the setting up of peer support groups, and awarded certificates for volunteering. According to the project manager, evidence of volunteering experience offered positive benefits to young mothers in terms of their future employability.

2.3.6 Church-based community project

This project was established 15 years ago and supported a range of local community services, such as debt advice, a credit union, a playgroup, and mothers and toddlers group. A family support worker had been employed to focus on the needs of young mothers, which included liaison with other agencies to co-ordinate support, information, advice and guidance and the setting up of self-help groups. Specific initiatives for young mothers included a 12-week 'teenage pregnancy prevention' programme aimed at teenage mothers or mothers to be. The focus of this provision was on supporting young mothers back into employment, training or education. The programme offered free childcare, lunch and travel costs.

The project was planning to start a 12-week young fathers' project in spring 2007.

2.3.7 Open Learning Centre

One initiative for young mothers was based in a local-authority-run adult education centre offering open learning programmes in basic skills. The centre offered courses in literacy, numeracy and IT to a range of adults up to GCSE level, either in small groups or one-to-one sessions.

The provision for young mothers had been established in collaboration with a teenage pregnancy worker who had identified a need among young mothers who were interested in attending college courses but needed to improve their literacy skills first. The young women attended a basic literacy course for two hours a week, which led to OCR¹ accreditation. Some were also taking advantage of facilities available at the centre to improve their IT and numeracy skills. There was an on-site crèche, which most of the young mothers were using, and travel costs were refunded.

Many of the young mothers in this initiative had no qualifications and a history of poor school attendance. To develop their confidence, the sessions were kept informal and the topics covered were relevant to their day-to-day lives as mothers.

¹ OCR is a UK awarding body. It was formed in 1998, when two major exam boards were brought together: Oxford & Cambridge Schools and the Royal Society of Arts.

2.4 Supporting access for post-16 young mothers into mainstream education and training

2.4.1 Young Mothers' Project, PRU

A young mothers' project based at a PRU offered a service for young mothers which supported access into further education and training. Referrals were mainly through health professionals such as midwives and health visitors. The key worker offered a range of services to the young mothers: home visits (although these were not always possible as she might have to deal with 250 to 300 referrals at any one time); advice and support about education and training opportunities available locally; information and guidance, for example about health services and benefits; visits to childcare providers; signposting to other agencies for further support. The project worker liaised regularly with staff from other agencies (eg Connexions, youth service, health) to co-ordinate and share information about progression issues for young mothers.

The key worker reported that 65 of the young mothers on her books were currently in college or other forms of learning. Part of her role was to maintain contact with the young mothers, as well as their tutors and childcare providers, and to help with any problems which might arise. At one of the colleges, there was a range of part-time courses available, as well as an open learning centre offering courses in literacy and numeracy, and these were popular with young mothers (see above about Open Learning Centre provision). However, she thought there was generally a gap in the availability of more flexible learning opportunities in the area.

The project had a small budget to offer financial support to young mothers attending college, for example if they were ineligible for EMA funding. This could contribute towards the cost of travel and course equipment.

2.4.2 Taster courses (Reintegration Officer/Connexions PA)

This was a multi-agency partnership initiative which aimed at developing a more systematic 'moving on' strategy for post-16 young mothers to encourage progression into further learning. The partners involved were the local authority Reintegration Officer, a Connexions Teenage Pregnancy Adviser, Sure Start, a Care to Learn development officer and a local college. Following consultation with young mothers on the Connexions database, a number of taster sessions were set up in the college. The tasters ran one day a week for five weeks, with the aim of building confidence and allowing young mothers to become more familiar and comfortable within the college environment. The main curriculum areas selected were hair and beauty and childcare, as these had been identified by the young mothers themselves. Childcare support, mainly in local nurseries, was made available through Care to Learn funding. The key workers interviewed emphasised that availability of Care to Learn

had been crucial to the success of the initiative. Other funding came from various sources including Sure Start and the teenage pregnancy budget.

The Connexions TPA also offered on-going support to young mothers on mainstream further education courses. Her role involved offering support in addressing a number of barriers they might face, including access to financial support, childcare issues, and liaising with student services and course tutors.

2.4.3 FE Colleges

As part of the research, staff with experience of working with young mothers in two large FE colleges were interviewed, to explore further the types of flexible provision available within mainstream FE.

- In the first college, the key worker was a Connexions PA, part of whose role was to offer support to teenage mothers studying at the college, as well as to those wishing to apply for an FE course. Referrals came mainly from Teenage Pregnancy PAs working in outreach services and from student support services. The services she offered included: support with Care to Learn applications; advice about progression between courses; and negotiation and liaison with course tutors on behalf of pregnant young women and teenage mothers.

She reported that there was no overall strategy for supporting young mothers at the college and that flexibility of approach varied from one programme area to another. For example, some staff were more flexible than others around issues such as absence due to child illness or for health appointments.

- The second college had developed an innovative programme for young mothers in partnership with the local Young Mothers' Support Service. This consisted of a 12-week programme covering mothering skills, communication skills, health awareness and CV writing. The programme was LSC funded, with Care to Learn funding for childcare costs, and was accredited through a City and Guilds Record of Achievement. The sessions took place in a supportive environment, with students being encouraged to draw on their own experiences.

One innovative aspect of the programme was that it took place partly in the college and partly in a nearby Children's Centre, which provided the childcare facilities. The tutor reported that bringing the students into college one day a week had helped them to become more familiar with the college environment and had given them the confidence to think about applying for mainstream FE courses.

3 Learning Providers - Key Issues and Themes

3.1 Introduction

Despite the diversity of flexible interventions available to young mothers and pregnant young women, a number of common themes emerge from the interviews. These relate to the strategies and approaches used with this target group, and the challenges faced by providers themselves in addressing the needs of young mothers.

3.2 Positive strategies for working with young mothers

A holistic approach to learning

Many providers emphasised the importance of taking a holistic approach to working with young mothers and of addressing some of the wider social and practical issues faced by their clients, at the same time as developing their education and employability skills. In many cases, education providers offered an integrated package of activities, including personal development, confidence building, social activities, information and guidance about housing and benefits. This approach was felt to be particularly appropriate for young mothers with multiple problems, such as family and personal issues, lack of self-esteem, behavioural problems, non-attendance at school, and so on. Many respondents were of the view that these issues were likely to have a negative impact on young mothers' learning unless addressed as part of the intervention:

'... half of them have got criminal records, petty things. A lot of girls who come in have trouble reading and writing, spelling, numeracy – and confidence in themselves is the biggest one ... We help them with all those issues; we're social workers, tutors, mothers. Part of our role here is to work with them on all those areas.'

An important outcome of the programme, according to this respondent, was the growth in confidence and self esteem of many of the young learners:

'I've seen individuals that have come here with very poor literacy and confidence, attitudes, self-esteem, very poor outlook on what they want to do in life and no qualifications, and then they've left here, and they've totally transformed themselves.'

Another respondent commented that this integrated approach was effective in laying the foundation for future engagement with education and employment:

'There must be room for this holistic approach as it paves the way for them becoming economically active later.'

It is also crucial that the availability of intensive one-to-one support remains available to post-16 year old young mothers as they move beyond a specific intervention, for example through the transition to college or other learning:

'It's working with them trying to remove the barriers to stop them moving on into that. It's a full package. It's sorting out a lot of financial problems, encouraging the fact that if they do go to college, benefits won't be affected. It's helping them sort out the childcare, helping them access funding, helping with the EMA funding. Helping them sort out other problems, personal problems that might stop them continuing, so it's working with them. It's not just a case of moving them into college or training, it's keeping in contact with them when they are in so they won't drop out if a problem arises, trying to sort them out.'

Curriculum tailored to the needs of the client group

Linked to the holistic approach was the emphasis placed by respondents on tailoring the curriculum and mode of delivery as far as possible to the needs of young mothers. Various examples of this approach were mentioned in interviews.

Providers working with pregnant teenagers and mothers below the statutory school leaving age aimed to keep them within mainstream schooling wherever possible. However they also highlighted the need for alternative forms of provision to be available for cases where staying in school would be problematic, or to engage those teenage mothers who had already become chronic non-attenders. Such alternatives could include PRUs, informal support groups, mentoring or home tutoring.

Key workers from one area commented on the absence of any such alternative provision available locally. They felt that such alternative arrangements, with more intensive one-to-one support, might be more appropriate for some young mothers with multiple problems, such as behaviour difficulties or poor school attendance.

'The thing is, our service was set up with a budget that provided for young women who were in school, and the notion was that the teaching that our staff provide was to pick up, maintain and prepare them to go back. If they've not been in school and not done any work then the rule was we don't have them ... they're treated as non-attenders'

However, the key workers endeavoured to stay in touch with young mothers in danger of disappearing 'down a black hole' and tried to engage them in alternative provision outside the school system.

There were a number of courses which had been set up specifically for young mothers or pregnant young women and were being successfully adapted for delivery in a range of settings. One example of this was the YMTB course which offers a nationally recognised form of accreditation to young pregnant women and was being delivered in various locations by vocational training providers as well as voluntary organisations. Other providers had developed their own tailor-made courses, incorporating personal development, parenting skills, health awareness, basic and key skills, employability skills and so on.

Providers who were supporting access into mainstream education, particularly further education, for post-16 young mothers were also being creative in their approach. This was done, for example, through offering taster sessions in subject areas known to be popular with young mothers (hair and beauty, childcare, health and social care) or working with providers to develop 'bridging' courses to improve literacy skills in preparation for progression into further education.

In other programmes, the development of basic skills was linked to practical parenting needs such as form filling and money management. One respondent pointed out the value of 'embedding' literacy and numeracy within the curriculum, thus making them more relevant to learners' needs:

'It's not a case of "you're going to do maths and English today". They are going to do maths today ... but they do it all geared towards buying a cot, buying a car seat, how much would it cost if you had to buy this. So it's all geared towards them having a baby.'

Courses were also evolving to suit the needs of each particular group of young mothers attending. The curriculum was not necessarily set in stone, but allowed to be flexible so that specific needs could be addressed. A few courses, especially those aimed at encouraging post-16 year old mothers to return to learning, included an element of consultation. There might be standard topics that were always covered, but each cohort attending the course was also asked what they would like to learn. This was found to be successful in motivating some young mothers and keeping them engaged.

A friendly environment and informal approach to learning

The approach of many providers working with young mothers was informal, with learning taking place in small groups with additional one-to-one support. One tutor pointed out the importance of an informal approach with this particular target group:

'We do a lot of micro group teaching. It's very informal because a lot of these girls dropped out of school in Year 10 or 11, and they don't respond to that type of teaching, directorial class room type environment.'

There was also evidence from interviews with young mothers that they appreciated this kind of learning environment. Some respondents, who attended a young mothers' group, said that attending the group sessions was very important to them. They felt that it was a safe place where they could go to talk to people in the same position as themselves, and where they would not be judged or subjected to the negative stereotyping of young mothers they experienced elsewhere. Other young mothers commented on the friendly attitudes of staff and a sense of being allowed to 'be themselves':

'It is quite laid back isn't it ... I mean we've got rules but we are able to express ourselves and not feel that we have to be someone we are not.'

Within this informal environment there were still rules that had to be adhered to. For example, there might be more flexibility around attendance levels than for other young students, but this did not mean that it was acceptable for a young mother to simply skip some days. It was expected that, if not attending on any day, they would phone in before a certain time and offer an acceptable reason. There might be some debate around what was an acceptable reason. However, the young mothers interviewed were largely prepared to accept this – as long as they felt fairly treated and respected. Indeed, a number had found that their course tutors were more flexible and prepared to make exceptions about attendance than they initially thought would be the case.

Providing accredited learning

The majority of learning providers in this study were offering accredited learning. This might be through more formal qualifications such as GCSEs, literacy and numeracy qualifications, Certificates or Records of Achievement, or YMTB courses leading to NVQs. Certificates in first aid, food hygiene and signing were also being provided. This was, in some cases, necessary to obtain funding for the provision. However, it was also seen as important in boosting the confidence of young mothers and in helping them move on to further learning or employment. A number of the young mothers had not done well at school and/or had never achieved any qualifications. Obtaining some qualifications helped build self-confidence in their ability to achieve.

Free on-site childcare and other forms of learner support

Care to Learn was paying for the majority of childcare while the young mothers were in learning, although one provider was accessing alternative funding. This might be in the form of a free on-site crèche for participants, or they might be using a range of other, formal childcare. A few young mothers were using family to care for their child (and not accessing Care to Learn funding). The payment for childcare was essential to engage most of the young mothers in any form of learning.

Most of the initiatives also covered transport costs and provided free food to learners. These were also very important in attracting young mothers and mothers-to-be.

Many were also rewarding or celebrating success in some way. Success might be measured in a range of ways including good attendance and achievement. A small token for a bookshop or some other store might be given. Some held ceremonies at which certificates were handed out. These were all seen as important in motivating young mothers to take their learning seriously, to recognise that they could perform well and that achievements were worth celebrating.

Facilitating progression into further learning

Various initiatives incorporated advice and guidance aimed at supporting progression into further learning. For example, staff in one voluntary organisation were aware of the need to support young mothers in 'moving on'. They helped them with developing individual learning plans, portfolio building, CV writing and provided information about local courses. At another training provider, the 'moving on' plan for young mothers included incentive bonuses for those engaging in further learning or going into employment.

In the further education programme specially developed for young mothers (described in Section 2.4.3), bringing the learners into college for one day a week had helped them become more familiar with the institution and with the idea of progression onto other courses. The tutor reported that eight of the ten students from the previous run of the programme had progressed into full-time courses at the college.

Many other examples were given in the interviews of learners having successfully moved on to other forms of provision, often at FE colleges or other mainstream courses:

'One has just gone on a "Women in Security" course. She now wants to get a job in it. Mothers I've worked with have gone on to do GCSEs, Access courses, fashion design courses. Some have just done that themselves, they haven't necessarily come through me. Some have gone on IT courses, digital camera courses that are organised by the multimedia training provider down the road.'

However, as many respondents emphasised, successful entry into college was by no means the end of the story. As discussed elsewhere in this report, young mothers entering further education faced a number of difficulties which could relate to childcare arrangements, financial support, negative attitudes of tutors or inflexible institutional practices or procedures. They often needed additional and on-going support in dealing with these and remaining in learning.

Partnership working and linking into local strategies

Many providers referred to working in close partnership with other agencies such as health workers (particularly those with a remit for working with teenage mothers), other learning providers, and guidance agencies, such as Connexions. They regarded this networking and collaboration as an important part of their work in terms of receiving referrals to their provision, sharing information about young mothers and signposting learners when they were ready to move on to other provision. There was evidence from many of the interviews that providers were meeting regularly to share information in this way:

'We also have [a] meeting about once a term where we invite all the other providers outside the school provision and we share information about girls who have been referred of school age. If we don't feel we can give them the support that they need we'll invite other people to take it up and share confidential information about what their needs are. It's not just with the schools, it's on a wider arena.'

In one area a multi-agency approach had led to the development of new ways of working with teenage mothers:

'Another big impact is these taster courses which have been set up with consultation with the young mothers ... and what we're finding works is if we work together, multi agency. So instead of just one agency going off and trying to set something up, we find it works better if we draw all our skills together, funding, staff, resources, bouncing ideas off each other.'

Some initiatives were clearly linked into wider networks of health and education agencies, for example as part of a local authority Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, and this appeared to be an effective way of co-ordinating provision in a particular area:

'Over and above what I mentioned earlier is we work quite directly with the Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinator and various groups that function under that to do with the strategy.'

Some organisations worked closely with mainstream education providers (eg schools, colleges), to facilitate progression for young mothers, to raise awareness of the needs of the target group and to encourage greater flexibility.

3.3 Challenges for learning providers

Providers face a number of challenges in addressing the needs of young mothers and overcoming the barriers they face in returning to, and remaining in, learning. These are discussed below.

Funding issues

Funding for flexible forms of provision for young mothers came from a number of sources including LSC funding such as E2E, local authorities, Sure Start, Connexions, Parenting Fund and the Lottery Fund. Care to Learn was funding most of the childcare.

The sustainability of funding could be a particular issue for those outside the mainstream system, such as voluntary organisations. They were often creative in accessing different sources of funding for their provision but expressed concern about the lack of longer-term funding available. One respondent reported that LSC funding had been very effective in supporting their courses for young mothers. However, their current funding was due to come to an end and they were in the process of applying for more funding, both from the LSC and the Lottery:

'... it would be really nice to feel we could try again with future funding.'

Another respondent felt that there would always be a demand for the type of informal provision which they offered, but reflected that, as the wider teenage pregnancy agenda was going to be focusing much more on prevention issues, they might need to *'market what we do in another way'* in order to attract future funding.

Some statutory providers also expressed concerns about how provision for young mothers beyond 'core activities' might be funded in future, for example with the advent of the new Children's Centres:¹

'When the Children's Centres start it will be different, there will be far less money. The core services will be there, the stay and play, time out crèche, but we have no idea how many of the other services will be provided because far less money will be there and it will be up to the individual programme co-ordinators to decide how to allocate money so there's no allocation for training and employment work'

A Connexions Service in one area had accessed additional external funding to support particular initiatives targeted at young mothers, such as short 'bridging' courses, which would not be covered by their mainstream funding.

Childcare issues and Care to Learn

Many respondents expressed enthusiasm for Care to Learn funding and the difference this had made to the learning opportunities available to young mothers:

¹ Sure Start local programmes were well-funded, but the funding regime has changed with the advent of a national programme for Children's Centres. All Children's Centres have to have some involvement from Jobcentre Plus – and this is currently being developed. Many Children's Centres, particularly those in areas with high rates of teenage pregnancy, are setting up some provision for teenage mothers. However, at the time of conducting this study the full potential of this was not clear.

'A lot of them wouldn't have gone to college [without Care to Learn]. The post-16s definitely not, there is no way a lot of those could ... if you look at the figures now the amount of young mothers we have in college ... we wouldn't have had our increase from nine per cent two years ago to 30 per cent.'

Key workers considered that Care to Learn had also made a difference in enabling them to offer more flexible forms of provision:

'Again if you think about these ... courses that we run ... without Care to Learn we wouldn't have been able to run those ... without Care to Learn we wouldn't have been able to find funding for childcare because there are just not that many pots out there for it.'

Other respondents pointed out that, while Care to Learn funding was a valuable source of financial support, not all their clients were eligible to claim it:

'... we don't have that many mothers who are at that age [eligible for C2L] – most are 19 to 20, you get the odd younger one ... It needs to be for older mothers – 19 is too young ...'¹

One respondent believed that the problem of accessing childcare was the biggest barrier to learning for many of the young people she worked with. In her experience, childcare providers were not always keen on Care to Learn, because of delays in payment; sometimes they had to accept on goodwill that the money would come through. Examples were given of providers who had been caring for a child and not been paid for many weeks. These are problems of the past – when Care to Learn was first set up, there were delays in approving applications and making the payments, and this has now been addressed. It seems that in some areas such problems have not yet dwindled in people's memories or been overridden by more positive recent experiences.

In another area, however, there were reports of positive attitudes towards Care to Learn among childcare providers:

'We have a lot of good relationships with the nurseries. When you ring and say Care to Learn they're very positive They're happy to start the child knowing the money will come through because they've had such good experiences with Care to Learn.'

The cost of childcare was also an issue, especially in London and the south east. According to one respondent, although Care to Learn payments were higher within London, they were still not high enough to cover the London premium. Often this meant that childcare was only available for the actual timetabled hours, whereas in other areas it could cover childcare for additional study time.

According to another key worker from an FE college located in the south east, Care to Learn rates were barely high enough to cover the childcare costs incurred by those on a full-time course. There was a campaign being organised in the area to have the maximum rate increased to the same level as in London.

¹ Nineteen year olds became eligible for Care to Learn funding in autumn 2006.

Another problem mentioned in interviews was the lack of on-site childcare at some colleges and mainstream institutions. Some young mothers using childcare off-site were required to make two trips every morning and evening. A key worker running community-based courses reported that, while many young mothers progressed onto college courses, some dropped out because of childcare issues and the lack of college flexibility in supporting these. There had been strict attendance requirements on some college programmes, which young mothers were unable to meet, for example, because of taking time off to look after a sick child.

A similar point was made by a college adviser who reported that EMA could be stopped for students who missed sessions due to their child being ill, but this practice varied, depending on the attitude of the tutor.

Another respondent reported that she had found it difficult to find childcare to cater for the needs of young mothers on short courses (eg ten weeks). She was looking at finding more flexible childcare arrangements (eg with childminders) and was also working with local Children's Centres on this issue.

Access to appropriate advice and guidance

Examples were given of some young mothers having received misleading information about their entitlement to funds such as child tax credits, and to financial support while studying. In one area, some young mothers had been told by their local Jobcentre that if they received EMA they could not claim income support, which is not the case.

One key worker pointed out that part of her role was to ensure that young mothers going into further learning were equipped with the right information about their entitlements and the financial support available. She often had to correct the misleading impressions they had been given by other agencies:

'... it is having the right information because what we found with some of them, they might have gone into college and picked a prospectus up and just been told by somebody on reception "oh if you come to college all your benefits will stop". You know they are given the wrong information by other agencies so it is making sure that they have the right information, that they know they can get EMA, that they know their benefits won't be affected, that they know they can get their childcare paid.'

3.4 Ideas for encouraging more young mothers back into learning

Learning providers and other professionals interviewed were asked, in the light of their experiences, to suggest what particular interventions were likely to attract more young mothers back into learning. According to one respondent, the important thing for providers was being prepared to be flexible with Care to Learn and other forms of funding:

'Use Care to Learn flexibly ... I think some areas just think of it as, we can only get Care to Learn if you are on a full-time college course. So, yes, it is thinking out of the box.'

Some examples of this flexible approach that respondents thought had worked well with young mothers included the following:

- running support groups to attract 'harder-to-reach' young mothers:

'The hardest thing is reaching them. The fact that we've got a group, we are very lucky because we have got a chance to access young mothers. The problem is reaching young mothers who don't come to a group, or live in an area without a group. When you have a group it is much easier to bring training to them, running training courses where they can go together with friends. Particularly when they are younger they like to come with friends.'

- running short courses in practical subjects, arts and crafts etc. with on-site crèche:

'But to reach more of them I think you need a group and more short courses with on-site crèche ... with things like music, dance, drama, IT, practical things just as a starting point. With all the mothers I've worked with they are all good ways to get people back into the idea of doing a training course.'

- another respondent emphasised the importance of confidence building strategies:

'Confidence is a big thing stopping them going back to training. Sometimes it takes years to get past that barrier.'

This was echoed by a young mother who thought it would be helpful if there was more counselling available for young mothers as a lot of them have self-esteem problems and don't have the confidence to 'go for things'.

- a course tutor felt it was important to negotiate the curriculum with young learners rather than impose it on them from above:

'... listening to what they want and not what you want to teach them. If you're teaching them what they don't want to learn it's a waste of time.'

Other lessons which providers had learnt about engaging with young mothers included delivering courses in accessible community-based venues; providing a relaxed learning environment; offering free courses with free childcare, food and travel costs covered; easy access to staff and one-to-one support; opportunities to meet up with other young people to avoid social isolation; and embedding basic skills within other forms of learning which are relevant to young mothers' lives.

A final comment comes from a respondent who expressed a strong conviction, which many of the other key workers appeared to share, about the important role played by education in addressing poverty and disadvantage among young mothers:

'[I] strongly believe that education is the sound base for success for these new mothers ... I believe education can be their route out of poverty'

4 Current Learning Activities

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores why the young mothers interviewed had decided to study on the course, or courses, they were doing. In a number of cases, especially for those on specific courses for young mothers, it was less that the young mother had made a decision to attend, but rather that they had been persuaded by someone (usually a support worker, but sometimes friends or family). In the words of one young mother, they had been ‘dragged’ along. However, once there, those we interviewed had decided to continue attending and were very positive about their experiences.

This section on decision-making goes on to explore the advice and support given to the young mothers around starting a course. It is often difficult to isolate these data from the decision-making process, as support workers were commonly key in encouraging young women to attend a course.

Those who were under statutory school leaving age had fewer options – they should all be in school. Home tutoring is offered in most areas to young girls, especially when pregnant and immediately after giving birth. However, in some areas, there are other options for young mothers who really cannot (or will not) stay in school, and some examples were included in this study. Again, those young mothers we interviewed in such provision were positive about their experiences, many having been alienated from school before becoming pregnant.

The chapter goes on to explore the extent to which these young mothers had considered other options before choosing the course they were attending at the time of the interviews. The sample was split between those who had some previous experience of work or college since leaving school, either before or after becoming pregnant, and those who had not. For those on learning provision focused on young mothers, the majority had been inactive before joining, whereas those on mainstream college places varied more in their immediate prior positions.

4.2 Activities before the current learning

As reported in Chapter 1, the young mothers interviewed during the course of this study ranged from under 16 years to their early 20s. They had therefore had varying lengths of time in which to be involved in other activities before their current learning. Those who were below the statutory school leaving age had obviously become mothers while they were, or should have been, still at school. These were in learning because legally they had to be in school.

The rest included some who had had their baby while they were under 16 years; however, most had become pregnant after leaving school. Their attitudes to school and the extent of their involvement in compulsory schooling are discussed in Chapter 6. A few had been keen on school, had attended and had achieved a reasonable, if not high, number of GCSEs. The majority were not keen on school, and had attended to varying degrees.

Looking at the activities those young women who were beyond statutory schooling age had been involved in before their current learning, a number of themes emerge.

The majority of those who did not already have a baby by the age of 16 had found a job or started a college course on leaving school. However, this was not always a stable position. The majority of jobs entered were fairly basic, in that they did not offer many, if any, career opportunities and were relatively low paid. It did not take much for a young woman to leave the job or course she was on. Sometimes this was due to pregnancy. Others were beginning to demonstrate a pattern of job and/or course change before becoming pregnant. The reasons behind this include a combination of the attitudes and motivations of young people, but also the limited opportunities (particularly the jobs) open to them. A number simply reported that they stopped going to college or left their job when they found they were pregnant.

The following quotes provide some further examples:

'I worked up until I found out I was pregnant. I left my job; I had just had enough of it and was looking for another job at the time I found out I was pregnant. Then I didn't go back into work so I've been out of work for four years.'

Another had done an NVQ in childcare:

'Well, back then that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to work with kids. Yes it was good you know and I did it in record time and I loved it but I kind of had enough of where I was working; I didn't really like it so I got a job doing something completely different. I was working in an hotel ... and I got fed up and I wanted to become a midwife so I left there wanting to go into education I suppose, then I found out I was pregnant.'

'When I left school I went to college but I didn't like it so I just used to pretend I was going. I never used to go there really. [What were you supposed to be doing there?] A-levels and then I started my NVQ2 in Business Administration and I got to nearly the end of it and I left there because I got offered a job with a temping agency in an office. I was working for

<company name> canvassing. Then I left there and worked for <company name> cold calling and then I got pregnant.'

There were also examples where it appeared that a young person had lost her job because she was pregnant.

'I was working when I fell pregnant. I was working in a factory. They didn't renew my contract. They renewed it the first time, because they didn't know I was pregnant. But they didn't renew it the next time, because they knew I was pregnant.'

One young woman had initially gone back to the sixth form after taking her GCSEs but left due to the high turnover of staff. She found a job but was off sick a lot when she became pregnant – she was either sacked or had a dispute and left.

Another young woman had had her baby while at school, and subsequently went to college to do GCSEs. She had not lasted long:

'I didn't finish the course – it was rubbish. ... There was people taking drugs on the course and they were all really young.'

This shows how a range of circumstances can contribute to young people dropping out of learning.

Not getting on with others or their tutor while studying, or not getting on with others in a job, was a reason given by some for leaving. This might happen before or after they became a mother. Occasionally, pregnancy or having a child had contributed, but this was not always the case. For example, one young mother reported being 'kicked out' of college because of getting into a physical fight with another girl in her class. She felt this was unfair as she was suffering from depression at the time and had medical evidence to back this up. However, later during the interview it emerged that she had started various jobs but none had worked out due to problems she had around relating to other people. She took a job in a restaurant which only lasted a few days because the other people working there were foreign – she used racist language to describe them. This is perhaps an extreme example. However, it does illustrate the point that some of these young women would probably have found it difficult to settle into a job or college course anyway – pregnancy and motherhood made their circumstances more complicated, but were not necessarily the root of all their difficulties.

A general theme emerges of many of these young mothers not being clear about what they really wanted to do on leaving school, and a number were still unclear. This is not specific to this group, but true of many other young people. In some of the focus group discussions, there were debates about the difficulties of knowing what different jobs would be like, finding out what qualifications were needed to enter particular jobs, and knowing which jobs certain courses and/or qualifications could lead to.

'In the last year I have changed my mind ten times about what I want to do but when I looked at these courses I really wanted to work with young mothers like the ones I had met

here.... And then I changed my mind, I wanted to go into HR [human resources] but now I don't want to do that either.'

It is important to recognise that for some young women, becoming a mother either only has a minor impact on their ability to continue studying, or causes them to become more focused on gaining qualifications and a career.

Two examples are provided below:

- One young woman was in Year 10 when she fell pregnant and dropped out of school virtually straight away as she had bad morning sickness. The following year she went back on a reduced schedule to study for three GCSEs – childcare, English and maths. For these she achieved grades D, E and G respectively. After this, she went straight to her current college course.
- Another young woman became pregnant in Year 9 at the age of 13. At first she did not tell anyone. When she finally did, her mum was – as she had anticipated – very angry. Her friends and the school, however, were very supportive, once they had got over the initial shock. She did not miss very much school, attending right up until her daughter was born in November of Year 10 and returning straight after the Christmas holidays. A local nursery was happy to take very young babies.

Other respondents had already completed a range of courses by the time of the interview. Some of these had been done before, and others after, pregnancy. They were mixed in the extent to which they showed any clear progression. Some did, while others showed elements of chopping and changing.

As in the study of young mothers not in learning¹, some of the young women interviewed in the course of this research had been at home looking after their child before starting on their current course. Another issue was wanting time to themselves. For example, one young woman reported:

'My son started nursery in September and I just said that I wanted three months to myself and then I would worry about it [how to get qualifications necessary to return to work].'

4.3 The decision to attend their current learning

The reasons for attending their current learning were very mixed, but again, a number of themes emerge. It was not always the case that a conscious decision had been made but rather, they had ended up on a course for young mothers, enjoyed it and decided to continue attending. Others had made a conscious decision. There is also likely to be an element of post hoc rationalisation amongst these responses.

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

The sample included some young mothers who were on mainstream courses and many who were on a provision specifically set up for young mothers. Those on mainstream courses tended to, but did not always, have clearer reasons for studying on that particular course.

Two asylum seekers on mainstream courses at a college had very clear views. They needed to obtain qualifications to find good employment, and there was no question about this. Combining study with caring for a child was just something that had to be done, and if it was tough that was the way things were. A support worker also commented on different attitudes amongst young mothers who were asylum seekers compared to those from this country. The former often had more positive attitudes towards attending college and just getting on with what had to be done to place them in a good position for obtaining employment. The reasons for this are not clear. It could be, for example, because of the difficulties they had faced in their own country, making them determined to make the best of the new opportunities available to them. There might also be a different, more positive, attitude to the importance of learning and obtaining employment in their own country compared with that in Britain.

Another young woman was studying for a BTEC National Certificate in Health Studies at a local college. It is a two-year course which she began in September 2006 and will complete in June 2008. It is full time and she attends for five whole days a week. There is quite a lot of homework – both class assignments and coursework – and she is expected to do some independent work most evenings. She said that she does struggle a little balancing this with childcare. Ideally she would like to be able to spend more time with her baby but, at the end of the day, she wants to be educated and to be able to work and support him. She joked: *'I'm a typical modern woman, trying to do everything and do it all well!'* She chose her current course because she plans to go into nursing (possibly army nursing, although she realises that this may not initially be feasible with a young child) and it will enable her to do this. She did not consider any other courses as she has been set on becoming a nurse since she was very young and planned this particular route (the precise qualification and training) for herself long before she found out she was pregnant.

Another young mother who had recently been studying at college showed personal motivations to study and keep involved. However, she had a far less clear progression path. She had originally wanted to study hair and beauty but was not accepted on the course. She was offered, and took up, a place on her second choice – art and design. The decision to go to college was largely her own, although the fact that one of her friends was planning to do the same course was also a factor. This young woman had become pregnant in Year 11. On leaving school, she had completed a media course (her mum provided childcare). She wants to return to college to study photography:

'I'm an active person – I need stuff to do to keep me out of mischief, so I couldn't have done the staying at home thing.'

Those who were below statutory school leaving age had no real choice about whether they stayed in learning. However, where alternative provision existed, they did have some choice about where this took place. We know that some young people will do as much as they can to avoid attending school, and our sample probably has an over-representation from this group compared to young people generally. As discussed in the later section on attitudes to school, a number of these young women had tried their best to avoid going to school, with varying degrees of success. However, once becoming pregnant, attention does become focused on them.

In many areas, there is now co-ordination between the health services and Connexions and/or services for supporting young people in school. Once it is identified that a pregnant girl is still of school age, her details will be forwarded to the relevant contact. Plans are then put in place for supporting her through her pregnancy and subsequently, and how education will fit into this. Indeed, in one area, support workers reported that sometimes it is only when a girl becomes pregnant that it is realised she has not been attending school. This was particularly, but not exclusively, the case for those who had recently moved to an area and whose families were highly mobile.

The primary aim is to encourage these girls to remain in school. However, this is not always possible and those we interviewed were in various forms of alternative provision – for example, a PRU for young mothers and a YMTB course. In some circumstances, and in areas where such alternative provision is not available, home tutoring might be arranged for those who simply will not go to school, or are unable to for some reason.

The main reason the young girls were attending alternative provision was that they would not stay in school, but had to be in education. Sometimes this was due to the attitude of a school; in other circumstances it was due to the attitude and motivation of the girl herself. Poor prior attendance at school, leading to being behind with the work, and a lack of confidence about being in school, could contribute to this.

Our sample also included a few girls who were still studying in mainstream school, although most of these also had additional arrangements. For example, one was going to school for her GCSEs and spending one day a week at college studying hospitality, travel and tourism; because she is under 16 she reported that she has no choice around remaining in education. However, she chose her college subjects because many of her friends were doing these, and because they ‘sounded interesting.’ This further illustrates the vagueness with which young people (and not young mothers in particular) elect to study particular options.

Those who were on a course specifically for young mothers, and were beyond statutory school leaving age, showed varying motivations for being there. These ranged from being told to go there, to positively seeking something out that would help them better themselves. However, once there – whatever their initial motivations – nearly all the young women interviewed reported enjoying being there and wanting to complete the course and progress. Obviously, in a study of this nature, those

interviewed were the ones who had continued attending, rather than those who had dropped out.

Motivations for attending these specific provisions varied little across the range being looked at. In some cases, a specific provision was the only one in an area for young mothers and there was no choice between alternatives. In other areas, there was choice. However, there seemed to be little element of a conscious decision to attend a particular provision unless there were specific needs.

Personal contacts were an important source of information about the various courses for young mothers. While the source of information is not necessarily a reason for attending, there was a link here. For example, knowing someone else who attended and provided good feedback, or having some sort of contact with the organisation, was a motivation for some mothers:

'My sister goes and she told me about it and she started as a volunteer here. I used to volunteer on a Thursday to help in the Mums and Tots, and I was involved in the project and now they can't get rid of me. I'm still here but I don't volunteer anymore.'

Another young mother had heard about the provision from a lady she used to work for – her ex-employer's friend ran the group. Their own mothers working in the same organisation, or a grandmother meeting someone who ran the group, were also mentioned. Another commented:

'My mum said I might as well do it as I was doing nothing.'

Being bored was a frequent motivation:

'Well, my mother-in-law, she said to me about going. I didn't want to go at first and then it took me a few weeks and I got bored and I thought I might as well.'

'It was just something to do; as well it gets you out of the house for a bit.'

'Because I was bored, I was just stuck at home doing nothing. ... I have applied for college already and will start college in September, [coming here] just to keep me from being bored really. The fact that it was young mums attracted me, people in the same situation. ... You can speak to them; you get older people who look down on you and you can't really relate to them the way you can to people your own age.'

Being able to meet others in a similar situation and to use childcare were other motivations for attending:

'Being there with other people so my daughter could play with other children.'

'I was pregnant as well ... it is nice to have my other one in a crèche for a bit so I could just relax.'

On a course run by a voluntary organisation, the main reason the young women interviewed gave for attending was boredom. However, they did think that getting back into a routine and having to turn up for the course every morning would help them move back into education or paid work.

The key importance of support workers in persuading, encouraging and supporting young mothers to attend a course of this nature emerges strongly. This is also evident in the next section that looks at young mothers' views on the course they were attending. Young mothers talked about being told about the course by various support workers. For some, this had been enough to persuade them to attend. Others had needed more persuasion or support, and some examples are given below:

'I didn't know it existed until my health visitor dragged me here.'

'Yes, what it was, after I had my son, he was 13 days old, my dad died – we knew that he was going to die and we knew that he was holding out to see the baby being born, so my son was 13 days old. We stayed down at my mum's ... for about six weeks and then we came back up here, and I started getting really depressed and couldn't cope with life. So I went to my health visitor and she was like: "right okay, I know this <organisation name> and I will take you there". I was like: "I am not going" and she was like: "no, I will take you" and it was because she actually arranged to meet me one morning that I actually went. I know that if it had been left down to me there is no way I would have had the courage to walk in all by myself, so my health visitor met me across the road. We were in the old building then, and she took me in and introduced me to everyone. But otherwise if it wasn't for my health visitor I didn't know about the <organisation name>.'

A number talked about being contacted, usually by Connexions.

'They [Connexions] got in touch with me. When I went to ... for me scans and that, you fill this book in and they tick a box that you're a teenager or something, and then these teenage pregnancy people get in touch with you, and how to get teenagers back into education or something like that anyway. ... I usually meet her [Connexions Teenage Pregnancy PA] at my house ... or at the nursery. She fills in all my forms for me though, because I don't have a clue. ... Well the taster course was only on beauty; I didn't know which one to do. Because I didn't plan to do beauty; I just like saw it and went on it.'

These interviewees often had no specific plans but having been told about the course and helped to enrol, they were enjoying it.

Another pattern is that on finding themselves pregnant, a few respondents had been unable to continue on the course (or in a few occasions, with the job) they were doing, and had been channelled towards some form of alternative provision:

'I was at college and they suggested it.'

'I was supposed to do an E2E course but because I found out I was pregnant I just didn't know where to go and obviously I couldn't do the E2E course because I was pregnant so they said "we'll put you in a Young Mums to Be course".'

'I went to Connexions to go on benefits and stuff and they told me about this course because it pays more. I get EMA and travel allowance. EMA is £30 a week. I was working but I had to stop because you can't do anything when you're pregnant. They won't let you do anything, only stand behind the till.'

So far, although wanting to learn was given as a reason for attending a mainstream college course, this has not been mentioned in relation to specific provision for teenage mothers. Wanting to learn did not emerge as a strong motivation for attending amongst young women on this range of provision. It was mentioned by a few, but as can be seen from the discussion above, other motivations were more important.

A few respondents did comment on the learning content of their course:

'There's not many people who will employ you when they find out [that she was pregnant] either. You get qualifications as well – it's not just time wasted. And it's a chance to meet people who are in the same position as you.'

'I went for a job at <company name> but they said I needed to do E2E because of school grades.'

However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the learning content of these courses was valued by many young mothers once they were attending.

Respondents were asked about the advice and support they received in accessing their course. As might be expected, given the importance of various support workers in young mothers' decisions to attend a course, a range of advice and support was accessed and needed. Those attending mainstream college courses were less likely to report having used any advice and support. However, others commented on the importance of this, particularly around obtaining financial support.

Health visitors, reintegration officers, Connexions PAs and a range of others had helped young people access their course. The work was nearly always very intensive. For mothers who are below statutory school age, a plan has to be put in place to enable them to remain in some form of education – this will involve a key worker and often a range of others.

Support was also being given to help young mothers move on between different forms of provision – for example, to access mainstream courses. Support workers were, where they had time, helping young women choose and sometimes visit various childcare providers. They provided help with form filling, since, as some of the quotes already used show, this is something that many young mothers found difficult.

5 Views on these Courses

5.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at young mothers' experiences of, and views on, these courses. The majority of young mothers interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences, especially of those courses specifically for young mothers. Although some reported being pushed into attending a course and many had no real motivations (apart from being bored and wanting something to do), they enjoyed their course, felt they were achieving something, and many felt motivated to progress. Many had not really enjoyed school, and a number had not attended regularly. They were benefiting from, and preferring, the different types of provision visited in the course of this study.

The last section of this chapter goes on to consider the provision of support and advice. This was often a crucial part of what young mothers valued about their course.

5.2 Views and experiences

As discussed in the previous chapter, some of the young mothers interviewed had a range of experiences of learning and this might be before, during and/or after pregnancy. Some had dipped in and out of courses, and seemed to easily change their minds or decide to drop-out. Others showed more consistent motivation and either had or were on a clear progression route.

Those on mainstream courses at the time of the interview were nearly always positive about their course. It was something they wanted to do. They had been on a career track before having their baby and were motivated to achieve.

One young woman, who had a clear view of what career she wanted, reported that she very much enjoyed the course: *'some people might think I'm a geek but I like biology - the*

physiology part really interests me'. It is challenging sometimes but she likes to be challenged. There is nothing she dislikes or wishes was different, and in general it is how she expected it would be. She has had to miss college a few times because her baby has been ill so she has had to stay home with him. However, on these occasions, she had been able to catch up on work she has missed, usually by borrowing notes from friends, and her tutors have been very supportive. She was quite philosophical about this and saw it as her own responsibility, saying: *'that's life – if you miss something you need to find a way to catch up'*.

The amount of work required for private study was an issue for some young mothers. A number reported that they tried to do their work in between classroom sessions at college rather than at home, but this was not always possible. Some did not have a computer at home, and it was expected that work handed in would not be hand written. For a few, it was the sheer volume of work involved that was a problem, alongside having to care for and wanting to spend time with their child.

Those who had left a course were more mixed in their views. They had not enjoyed a course or had not got on with other students and teachers. While pregnancy could play a role here, it seems that deeper-seated attitudes and motivations were more important in determining such young people's adaptation to, and views on, education and training.

Those on provision that was specifically for young mothers reported a range of things they liked and valued about their course. These courses were all set up to address specific issues around motivation, poor previous educational experiences, low qualifications, etc., and help young mothers return to learning. As discussed in earlier chapters, they therefore applied a range of teaching methods and covered a range of subjects. They were unlike school or college in many respects. One way in which they were like school or college was the expectation that those enrolled would attend – in contrast to some of the drop-in provision at which interviews were conducted for the study on young mothers not in learning.¹ Those running these courses were often flexible in terms of allowing absences, for example if a baby was ill or there was a doctor's appointment and, in some cases, if a young mother had been up all, or most, of the night with her child. What was stressed was that they had to phone in before a certain time to say why they were not going to be in – it was not acceptable for them just to not appear, or to disappear altogether. On phoning in, the reason might not be accepted and a young mother might be persuaded to come in – however, the main point was that there should be a dialogue.

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

The general atmosphere and regimes

For many, a key attraction of their course was that it was not like school. They valued the relatively informal atmosphere, the more relaxed relationship with teachers/trainers. For some, the small size of these groups was important. They did not get lost in a large class, relationships were friendly and more informal. The following quotes illustrate some of these points:

'It is quite laid back ... I mean, we've got rules but we are able to express ourselves and not feel that we have to be someone we are not.'

'We are really good friends with the staff ... everything is really nice and everything is comfortable.'

'Friendly people, friendly staff, absolutely adore <course organiser> – I think she is fantastic.'

The flexibility around taking time off, and the rules about this were also valued. For example:

'You can have time off for appointments. It's not that strict really, not like going to college. Though if you don't come in for no reason then you don't get paid. But that's fair.'

'Going to appointments, that's okay, and if you're ill as well. You phone in, or if you're running late you phone in. If you don't phone in, you don't get paid at all that week. Even if you come in ten minutes late, it's still late. But it's just to get you ready for when you do go to college and when you finally do go to work. It's like you can't really be ten minutes late every day or you'll get the sack.'

One young woman reported being given a week off when she got married.

Other aspects that these young mothers reported liking were having little or no homework, not having to wear uniform, the more limited hours compared to some courses (especially in schools). Most of these specific courses aimed to have all the work done during course hours. However, a few respondents reported that they did sometimes work at home in the evenings – they were motivated to complete what they were doing and had a real interest in it.

The provision of food – usually lunch and usually free – was also popular:

'... free food. Constant supply of tea, coffee, that sort of stuff.'

Young mothers reported having fun and enjoying what they were doing:

'When I was in school I didn't do much work but now it's fun to do it, so I just sit there and get on with it.'

'I didn't really go to school or do the work but here you want to.'

Advice and support

The advice and support provided to young mothers while on the course was highly valued. When asked what they liked about the course many would name the course organiser/tutor, or others who came in to provide specific areas of advice. A theme emerges that is common throughout the Care to Learn evaluation, and that is the importance of broad-based, often intensive, advice and support for young mothers – in helping them return to, but also, crucially, in helping them remain in learning.

Many of these young mothers had a range of support needs. Some were estranged from their families and had little if any external support. Many had issues around relationships with their partners, housing and benefits, as well as bringing up a child and all the additional responsibilities this entails.

Where there was one course organiser, this person could often be called on to help a young mother with a wide range of personal and practical issues. For example, on a particular course it was reported that issues faced by an individual would usually be discussed by the whole group – who would offer help and support. The course organiser was often required to deal with issues outside her expertise, and through her broader experience and contacts was rapidly finding a range of other individuals and organisations to refer specific problems on to. For example, one young mother was experiencing behaviour problems with her child – she was referred to a voluntary organisation that works with families, providing a friend who will spend a few hours a week with a family to support them in any way they need. A young mother with depression had been referred to the college counsellor.

On other courses, young mothers talked about having help with benefits and housing. Long delays before income support was paid were reported. They had been passed around agencies, constantly being given different numbers to phone and often ending up back at the same place, no further forward. Finding accommodation if they had to leave their current home could provide further difficulties. Course organisers and other support workers were helping them address all these issues – sometimes through sign posting them in particular directions, and in other cases phoning up the respective agency directly themselves. Doctors and other health appointments might be sorted out. The young mothers really valued this aspect of their course.

They also received help applying for Care to Learn and other funding sources – as a quote used earlier illustrated, not all are familiar with, or confident about, dealing with forms and paperwork. For some on courses where they were eligible for EMA, there were issues around this. For example, those on one course were experiencing difficulties because forms were going astray; original paperwork had been posted and apparently not arrived. Course organisers were commonly following up on all these difficulties to help the young mothers stay in learning.

Furthermore, studying can introduce additional pressures. They might need advice and support around combining study and caring for their child, as well as other family pressures.

Another characteristic of the support that was welcomed by young mothers was that it was not just related to the specific course they were on. Course organisers and other support workers might inform a young mother about other courses, help with the application forms and other issues around applying. For example:

'At the end they help you; they do phone calls and help you with application forms; whatever you want them to do.'

The curriculum

Chapter 3 discussed the nature of the curriculum on these courses. It was based around issues of direct relevance or interest to the young mothers. A whole range of topics related to caring for and bringing up a baby were covered and, on courses including pregnant teenagers, what to expect and ask for around the birth was discussed and planned. Personal development was a key area that was covered in different ways on the various courses. Budgeting, healthy eating, cooking, benefits, alcohol and drug abuse etc. were all commonly included. This was often in addition to other more academic or vocational subjects. Numeracy and literacy were addressed through topics of relevance to the young women, so, for example, numeracy could be related to budgeting, while literacy might be based on discovering information and reading with their child. All these, and the ways in which they were delivered, engaged the young mothers and helped them to become more confident about, and interested in, learning.

The following quotes all illustrate in their own words what young mothers liked about, and were getting out of, this type of curriculum:

'It goes through, like: you have set tasks to do during it – sort of, what you like, dislike, what you are good at – that sort of thing; what you want to do in the future, because we have already done one unit and the second unit we are on at the moment is <title>. So it is, sort of, where you want to see yourself and what steps you take to get there – that sort of stuff. People say it is an easy course but it really does get your brain thinking because you are like: "I want to do this for a career but how am I going to get there?" You've got to work out how you are going to get there, childcare, and who is going to support you – and that sort of stuff.'

'I loved, what was that thing when they told you about, you know, the circles? That was really good, what was that? It looked at how you communicated, why we make decisions and why we do things we do. It was interesting. Why sometimes we choose to make bad decisions and why sometimes we are, like, structured. And who you get them from, like the way you are brought up, how it affects what you do.'

'It's formal ... but in an informal way. The way it's set out, it teaches you like different aspects of your life, and your child's life and how you're going to cope afterwards, and during. I find it ... it explains things that you never necessarily knew before.'

'I never knew anything about, benefit-wise, or where you can go for help ... or even how to look after the baby.'

'Writing CVs and letter of applications. Writing cheques. We've just learned that.'

'It's harder than I thought to pay for everything. They taught us everything you have to pay up and it's hard to imagine that you can pay that much off what you're getting. People say that you're using the benefits system but you need it to pay off all the bills you're getting. You can understand why people are on benefits.'

'You talk about problems and you realise that other people are going through the same thing that you are. [What sort of problems?] Sleepless nights, teething, domestic violence, the baby's father – things like that – family situations and problems, mothers' reactions when they find out you are pregnant, other people's reactions in the street when they see you are pregnant.'

Many of the courses adapted and evolved as they went along depending on the group attending. This was seen as important by those running the course, but also highly valued by the young mothers attending. If there was something of concern to them or that they needed help with, this could be covered in the course. They might debate a topic or find out more about it, helping to develop their skills. Some commented on how their course utilised their own experience, but also increased their confidence in their abilities. They realised that they had skills, abilities and information to offer.

On one course those attending had been involved in a research project. This had involved them designing a questionnaire and working out how to distribute it. The analysis had been conducted for them, but they had used the data to put across the messages they wanted. This had involved close working between the young women involved, and they had really got something out of the exercise. One commented:

'It was [interesting]. It was really tiring as well. Some days you'd walk out and your head would just be going bang, bang, bang. You would end up dreaming about what still needed to be done, I just couldn't get it out of my head.'

Teaching styles

Closely related to young mothers liking the curriculum, but a slightly different point, was their positive reaction to the teaching styles used. The pace of work was often different to more formal learning provision – they could go at their own pace – and the hours were less. There was also much more individualised attention. A number of quotes can be used to illustrate this:

'The English course I did, and the patience of the girls here and that, helps me. Also if somebody says a word to me – what does that mean, you know? there is no: "oh, for God's

sake, you should know that by now". They will tell me five or ten times, you know, what this word means until it eventually sinks into my head.' [This young woman was dyslexic and had struggled at school.]

'Not big blocks of work to do all at once. It's all broken down into little parts. All the work you do, you do it how you want, set it out how you want. There's no set way. . . You don't have to do it their way.'

'It's not too hard because it's only two days a week. It's easy, the way it's set out. The help the teachers give you.'

'I think it's because you get to work at your own pace, instead of like ... obviously, if somebody is like a genius in here, they can go up and whiz ahead but if you take a little bit longer than everybody else, they sit with you and take you through it slowly. If you're struggling, they're comforting with you struggling and help you through.'

'In school you either moved back a level or you're not helped at all.'

These approaches all helped the young mothers to gain confidence in their ability to learn. Those who had struggled in the past discovered that in the small-group, more supportive environment, they were learning things and achieving.

Another aspect of some courses, or in parts of some courses, was that the young women were not being told what or how to do things all the time. They were not constantly being talked at. The approach concentrated on facilitation and involvement, which again helped to boost their confidence in their abilities and realise that they had something to offer.

Having a break/time for themselves

In the study of young mothers not in learning¹, the young women interviewed often gave not wanting to leave their child as a reason for refusing to return to learning. A number of the young women interviewed in the course of this part of the research reported that they enjoyed having time away from their child(ren) – giving them time for themselves and a break. This does not mean that they were always confident about leaving their child in the first place (an issue discussed in the chapter on childcare).

It is not easy to distinguish differences between these different groups of young mothers which explain this. It was not simply that these mothers in learning had older children compared to those not in learning. Nor did they always seem to have fewer personal and other issues to resolve compared to those not in learning. Attitudes will play a role – with some of those in learning being more interested in this in the first place. However, there also seems to be an element of chance – in that, as illustrated in

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

the previous chapter, some of the young mothers in learning had arrived there in the first place due to the persuasion (perhaps more) of a support worker. If a young mother did not receive such support and persuasion, or lived in an area where there was no or little specific provision, returning to learning might be much more difficult, perhaps not even an option.

There was often a mix of emotions at work here. They valued having a break from their children and being able to utilise the time to do something positive. A number also commented on the importance of their course in giving them space to be themselves – to see that they were not ‘just a mum’, but a person with needs and views in their own right. Some quotes from the interviews vividly illustrate this:

‘The best reason was getting rid of the kids. Love them dearly but needed a break.’

‘I think being able to be yourself as well. ... As soon as you pick your kids up you go back into mummy mode and it is nice not being a mum for two hours at a time. You know you are still in the same building and you know your kids are still downstairs but it is being able to be yourself and have a little bit of freedom without going “don’t touch that, don’t do this, don’t do that”.’

‘The reason I first got involved was the [research project]. Because I remember <course organiser> saying to me, was I interested in doing it? and I was like: “yes, yes, sounds cool” but at the back of my mind it was the fact that I was getting to escape from my kids for two hours because it originally was just a two hour session. When we got a bit further along, it then changed to all day; because I had a four month old and another – she was 20 months – and my four month old did nothing but cry, scream and puke up over me all day long, seven days a week. So it gave me an opportunity to have a bit of a break and not realising actually how much it did. It was also like getting to know, because I had only just come to the <organisation name>, it was getting to know people as well and that was one way to do it. Instead of being a mum, being a person, and remembering what I am, about myself, that sort of stuff.’

Being with others who understand

An important element of being on the course for many young mothers was being with others in the same situation as themselves. There were two elements to this. First, they realised that there were others in the same situation as themselves:

‘It was comforting to know there was other girls in my situation. Before I didn’t know. I thought I was on my own and I was the only one.’

This gave them a sense of reassurance. Being a teenage mother can be isolating (as discussed in the report on young mothers not in learning¹). Being on the course also

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

gave them a support network and a group within which they could share experiences. They realised that many of the issues they faced were common to other young mothers, and that there was help available around addressing these.

The second element is that, being with peers in the same situation as themselves, they did not feel judged or looked down on.

'Being with other young mums and not looked down on or treated as a teenage mum.'

'They took you as they found you and that was the end of it really.'

'You don't get patronised by people because they're all in the same situation.'

One professional working with young mothers described how they might comment on each other's clothes and appearance – in the way that all teenagers do. However, they did not comment or make judgements about each other based on their pregnancy or being a young mother.

That support workers did not judge them was also valued. This supportive environment enabled them to address a range of issues, but also develop as themselves and gain confidence in their abilities.

Childcare

Access to childcare was something they all valued. Without childcare being available and paid for, the majority would not have attended a course. However, what was important to many of these young women was the support they received in finding childcare. Indeed, having childcare on-site so that they didn't have to sort anything out themselves was a key issue for some:

'I think the thing that appeals most is the childcare because you don't have to go out of your way to organise anything.'

Being close to the childcare, and being able to still spend time with their child, was also important to some:

'You know they are only downstairs and we get to take them out for lunch so we are still spending time with them.'

One course organiser commented on how the young women she worked with were nearly all worried about leaving their child for the first time. The childcare was on the same site as most of the learning – for the first few weeks, the young mothers had been regularly walking down the corridor to see how their child was doing. They also quickly built up a rapport with those providing the childcare. Gradually they relaxed about the childcare, and were positive about using it.

Some courses, where the childcare was on-site, included learning activities that involved both mother and child, eg crafts. This was highly valued and enjoyed.

Getting their child used to attending childcare was another positive aspect about attending a course, especially if they were using childcare on-site or only leaving them for a few hours:

'I think plus if you have a child already you get them ready for nursery with all the other people because when you are at college and have to leave them they get used to that as well.'

Improves confidence and motivation

The young women were also positive about their courses because they felt they were benefiting from attending. They talked about improved confidence, realising that they had abilities and that they could learn. They also reported how the courses had helped them get back into a routine – of getting up and ready by a certain time in the morning, of going out – providing a structure to their day that would be useful experience for them later, assuming they progressed to further learning or employment. Several also enjoyed being pushed and challenged – it was too easy to stay at home and get out of the habit of doing anything other than childcare and domestic tasks.

Again, some quotes illustrate these points:

'I think it made me more determined – everybody else as well. We all show up and we do it, I think it pushes us more slightly. It is when you sit on your own at home and think "I want to do it" you don't really do anything about it but when you are talking amongst each other and you are sharing ideas'

'Yes, back into reality, sort of thing; get the brain working again. I was wondering for a long time if there was one actually still in there – I must admit, actually. Because I am dyslexic with my reading and my spelling, when <child's name> was first born I would worry about sitting and reading books and everything but since I've come here it is like gaining confidence – I sit and read a book everyday, whereas before I would be trying to. I mean she would only be a year and I'd be like: "no, go to daddy, he will read you the book." She would come up with a book and I'd say: "no, daddy will read it".'

'Being here shows you that your life doesn't end when you get pregnant. You can go back and people can look after your baby while you learn or study.'

'You've got to get the baby dressed and drop him off and then yourself. You had to get back into a routine. You are used to just getting up and lazing around – not lazing but you know if you've got to get ready you make breakfast, stay at home. You've got to get up early and get ready, you get used to it – getting up and you have to go back to college as well.'

'Gets you up in the morning as well, getting you back into a routine. And to start mixing with other people again.'

5.3 Difficulties and changes

This section looks at the difficulties young mothers reported around attending their course and things they would like changed. It is brief. Most respondents had little to say in relation to either of these topics. Surprisingly, even those on mainstream courses had little to report.

The main difficulty experienced was around transport. Sometimes this was around the cost of travel, but more often the logistics. Nearly all those on a course specifically for young mothers reported that they had their travel costs reimbursed. However, for those studying at a college (including a course specifically for young mothers run by and partly at a college) this was not always the case. The young mothers interviewed seemed to be dealing with this, but it was still an issue for them – and might well discourage some less motivated from attending.

The logistical difficulties of travelling to a course were graphically described by some young mothers. Particular problems arose around using buses, and especially when they lived in a relatively remote or less well served area. One young mother provided the following description of her journey to attend the course:

'What makes it difficult is the buses. Because up until five months ago I lived in town but then we only lived in a one bedroom flat and about five months ago we moved to <name> which is about three and a half miles away so it is either an extremely long walk or a bus and that is the only thing that makes it difficult. I've got a double pushchair and sometimes I can't get on the bus because it is too full or it already has pushchairs on it and I have to collapse it. That is the only thing I hate – the buses. I think six buses went past me the other day before I could actually get on one and you get really frustrated.'

Generally, covering the costs of learning was also commented on, for example:

'We should get paid more. ... It's hard to live on £30 a week and I've still got to pay my rent on time and pay the electricity.'

For a few of those on mainstream courses, the amount of private study was an issue. They had to be very organised and motivated to do this, often during the evening. Especially when they were living alone and did not have a local support network, this could add to the demands on them. Many others generally commented on the additional difficulties of combining study with caring responsibilities.

A few commented that they did not like having to get up early to attend their course. While there was an element of 'tongue in cheek' about this, they were often serious. Getting up to attend school had been challenging for them before being pregnant; now that they had to get their baby ready as well as themselves this could be even more of a problem.

When asked if there was anything they would change about their course, again there were few issues reported. Most commonly they wanted it to last longer – either in terms of hours a day, days a week, or the overall number of weeks.

Some of the courses were running for very few hours a week. The young mothers attending found that the time passed far too quickly – there was not really enough time to do the work:

'Probably would have had it for a bit longer so you can get more stuff in as well. ... I am not saying things to put in but so as you can spend longer.'

The courses specifically for young mothers varied between lasting for a fixed number of weeks to being on-going. A number of those on courses lasting a fixed time commented on how they would like it to last for longer. They had developed friendships and support networks through the course, had learnt and achieved, and wanted to continue doing so. In some cases, this was because they did not feel ready to move on to some other form of provision. In others, there was nothing for them to move on to, or at least not immediately. For example, one course lasting 12 weeks would finish in February. A number of young women attending wanted to go on to college, but their courses did not start until September. They reported needing something to occupy them and keep them motivated during that intervening period. A number of support workers reiterated that need. They reported how young mothers would attend a course, become motivated and want to move on – but for some, this motivation could wane if not immediately utilised.

5.4 Advice and support

The advice and support provided to young mothers before, during and after these courses is crucial. The role of support workers in helping young mothers access learning has already been discussed. On courses specifically for young mothers, one benefit for those attending was the wide-ranging support provided by those running the course. In some cases, the person running the course was the main source of support. In others, a range of professionals would either attend on occasions or generally be available to support the young women.

A number of themes emerge about the nature of the support needed. It often has to be intensive and one to one. Although the issues being faced might be shared and discussed within the group, the precise nature of many problems were specific to individuals. For example, obtaining the benefits they were entitled to was problematic for many young mothers; although the overall issues might be similar, the specific details would vary. These young mothers rarely had a single issue that they needed help with – personal relationships, lack of confidence and motivation, housing, benefits and bringing up their child could all be problematic.

To provide support, the professionals had to build up rapport with the young mothers, and often their families as well. This could take time and often involved home visits. A number of support workers talked about initial contact with young mothers (often while they were still pregnant) being through home visits. Some of the young women were not confident or motivated enough to go to an official location. Indeed, some were quite critical of various organisations, or types of organisation:

'If you go and try to talk to someone at the Jobcentre, because you're young they just ... I mean I got mucked about really bad. They put me on bridging allowance when I should have been on severe hardship allowance, or even jobseekers and it was just not getting through to them. I came here and spoke to my key workers at <organisation name> so now I'm on the right thing.'

'You go to some professional and it's just like, oh they're just trying to fill you with a load of crap. That's what I've found; it's better speaking to people with experience than those people who are sitting behind a desk working on a computer all day, because they just fill you with loads of crap and they put you on the wrong things and they're just not helping.'

They needed to trust the person or people giving support, to develop a relationship with them, and feel that they were being treated with respect.

A wide range of named individuals and job titles were mentioned by young mothers as either their main sources, or useful sources, of support. Those running or convening a course were nearly always named as a major and very important source of support and advice. Others had contact with health visitors, midwives, Connections PAs, Sure Start and various key workers who they commented on positively. This might be through them visiting the course, or through meeting with them externally.

Those on mainstream courses in colleges were more mixed in the extent to which they reported utilising support and advice. Those who were more motivated and on a clear progression route often seemed more able to sort things out for themselves, or to just 'get on with it'. However, several did name particular individuals – usually a Connexions PA or Reintegration Officer – who helped them with any issues that arose, particularly when finding out about, and applying for, courses.

Mixed pictures emerged of how supportive FE colleges are generally of young mothers. The survey of learning providers showed a very positive picture of flexibility and support.¹ However, other in-depth data suggests a more negative picture. In the course of the interviews conducted for this particular study, various unsupportive practices in colleges were reported by young mothers and some support workers. This included not being able to start or continue with a course because of being pregnant, and being made to feel inferior due to attitudes expressed about young mothers.

¹ Dench S (2007), *Learning Provision for Young Parents. A survey of learning providers*, IES Report 440.

It does seem to depend on who is talked to in a learning provider as to the extent and nature of flexibility reported. Furthermore, many providers (particularly colleges) are large organisations, so while there may be some standard practices, approaches and attitudes can vary greatly across departments. For example, support workers, either based in colleges or having close working relationships with students in colleges, reported that the extent to which tutors and others were understanding about the issues faced by young mothers did vary between subjects. While some were very understanding about higher levels of absence, others took a much tougher line. One support worker reported that the course director in one subject area felt that young mothers would not be treated any differently to others at work, and so there was no reason to do so at college. Another commented:

'I think some of the tutors are really judgmental, in that they perceive that this student will have more time off/lateness than most due to their child and use it as an excuse. At interview some teen mothers have almost been discouraged and told: "how do you expect to cope?"'

Those working with individual students in colleges reported having to negotiate with various tutors on behalf of a young mother. For example:

'Many times I have called a student/tutor meeting to try and resolve issues before things get out of hand.'

A young mother interviewed in one college had come in that day to discuss problems she was having with her course tutor. These problems did not seem to be specifically related to her being a young mother, but rather attitudinal in nature. However, this does illustrate the range of issues that those working with young mothers often have to deal with.

6 Attitudes to School

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the attitudes to school expressed by the young women interviewed. The majority had not been very keen on school, with their approach ranging from indifference to real dislike. A few had enjoyed their time there and always attended.

The attitudes and experiences reported are very similar in nature and range to those expressed by the young mothers interviewed for the study looking at those not in learning.¹ It was commented in that report that many young mothers dip in and out of learning (and sometimes work). They are not permanently part of the NEET group, but move in and out of this position. The sample of young mothers not in learning included some who were a long way from attending any form of learning provision, although they might go to very informal drop-in groups. They had too many day-to-day living issues to sort out; they wanted to spend time with their child; participating in any learning was not a reality for them. Others were closer, and either had some experience of learning or were interested in doing so.

What is different about the young mothers interviewed in the course of this study is that they were all in learning at the time of the interview. Apart from some attitudinal differences, they were in areas where there was relevant provision or they had somehow come into contact with the provision that was available. Some courses specifically for young mothers only provide a fixed length course. Once finishing this, some of the young mothers interviewed for this particularly study might well move back into the NEET group – although their motivation to return to learning might be stronger than in the past.

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

6.2 Attitudes to school

Some of the young women interviewed were under 16 years old and were legally meant to be in school but for a range of reasons were all attending some form of alternative provision, such as a PRU or YMTB course. These were the most disengaged from school, but their general attitudes were similar to young mothers interviewed who were beyond statutory school leaving age.

A number reported not attending much before they became pregnant. This was sometimes (but by no means always) with the collusion of their mothers, or their mothers not noticing or 'turning a blind eye'. They struggled with their school work, due to being less motivated and confident, and due to poor attendance. Becoming pregnant had led to them moving to the alternative provision. This was sometimes due to difficulties in being pregnant at school. However, once a young girl becomes pregnant, a plan is drawn up including how she will be integrated into education. If there is no way she can be persuaded to stay in school, alternative arrangements have to be made.

The dislike of school expressed by a large proportion of the young women interviewed nearly always went back to before they were pregnant. Some did, however, report additional factors related to their pregnancy. For example, one young woman said that she was told to wear a baggy jumpy once she started to show.

It is important to remember that although some see the stereotype of young mothers as being poorly qualified, lacking motivation and not being interested in school, this is not always the case. Our sample included young mothers who had done well at school and were highly motivated. For example, one young woman (now at college and on a career track) reported that she had enjoyed school and attended regularly. She liked schoolwork and was in the top sets for all her subjects except maths. She found out she was pregnant at the beginning of Year 11 when she was 15. This was totally unplanned and unexpected. Initially she was very worried as the baby was due around the time of her GCSEs. However, she still managed to sit five (RE – A, English – B, Double Science – CC, and Maths – D). Her school was very supportive, letting her sit at the front of the exam hall near the invigilator and go out if she needed to. Although she knows she did well, she likes to think she could have done even better had she not had the additional stress of being heavily pregnant.

Others had attended school at least most of the time, and reported sitting their GCSEs (although with varying degrees of success).

Many did, however, match more closely to the stereotype. Some had never really been interested in school, others became bored or found other things to do that were more interesting:

'I always went but I think I got a bit bored towards the end of school. I was working as well and I left school a few months before the end because of boredom. I did go back to do my exams but it wasn't worth it.'

'I did [attend] when I was little but as I got older, no. Same as <name> I started getting bored and started getting boyfriends, older boyfriends and I would pretend I was going to school and go to their house and be there all day and then go home. Never liked school. ... I didn't even do my exams. ... I was too interested in men.'

'I enjoyed some of it but I didn't always attend. I enjoyed some of them but I also enjoyed skiving as well. You know things like geography and woodwork, if I couldn't be bothered then I would skive it. I'd sit under the subway smoking cigarettes.'

A few had such poor attendance and often poor behaviour records that they had been expelled; one from two schools:

'Well it wasn't even really home school but that is what they called it, they just sent the work home to me. That was half of Year 10 and Year 11 and I went in just to do my exams.'

Others had mixed school careers. They had been unable to get away with truancy due to one or both of their parents. For example, one young woman reported that she hated school and from Year 9 onwards would 'skive off' whenever she could, although overall her attendance level was reasonable. This was largely because both her parents worked at the school doing cleaning and odd jobs, hence pressure was put on them to make her attend. Another reported getting away with missing school:

'Until they started ringing and saying <name> is not in her lesson and I would go home – "how was school?" – "yeah, great mum" and I would get ... [into trouble].'

However, as commented above, some mothers colluded in or took no notice of their daughter missing school. Others probably could do little about it, although we did not specifically explore parental views.

There was also evidence of some young women changing their attitude towards school. For example:

'I didn't particularly like it ... Year 7 and 8 I didn't go very much and I got into trouble for not going. I started going again. I didn't really like it but I knew I had to do it so I just did it. But I wasn't particularly good when I was at school ... I was pregnant by the last year, I settled down a lot and so I managed to get quite good GCSEs.'

Another commented on how, when she was given more individual attention, she did start behaving better and achieved some qualifications. Although this is only one example, it does perhaps provide some support that the teaching methods adopted in some of the learning provision included in this study might be relevant in other contexts:

'I used to be like really badly behaved up until about Year 10 and the teachers started giving me a chance and helping me so I started behaving from Year 10 to Year 11. That was my best year there and I ended up leaving with my GCSEs.'

6.3 Reasons for not liking school

The reasons given for not liking school generally reflect those already reported in the study of young mothers not in learning.¹ These fall into several categories. A number of the aspects of school that were disliked are delivered differently in the range of flexible learning provision included in this study – and this was positively commented on as illustrated in the previous chapter.

These young mothers did not like the overall structure of school – they didn't like the discipline, being told what to do, etc.:

'You can't do this and you can't do that. You've got to wear this, blah, blah, blah.'

'The same thing every day.'

'I didn't like going to lectures and stuff like that very much. Our school was very strict.'

'I didn't like being told what to do.'

Others didn't get on with teachers. Several reported personality clashes with a teacher:

'Geography: I hated the work, hated the teacher – there was a personality clash. Woodwork: I enjoyed it sometimes but I thought my teacher was a bully so that was one of the reasons, just the fact he was a bully. I hated PE – why do you have to play hockey in the winter?'

'Our teachers used to pull us off the chairs. ... Our maths teacher did. He left after that.'

One young woman reported that the main reason she disliked school was that she found it difficult to get on with teachers. She resented the fact that they wouldn't let her wear trainers and were always nagging her about not being in the correct uniform. There was one teacher in particular, apparently, who always picked on her, telling her she was useless and that there would be no point in her staying on at school after GCSEs because she'd never done well.

Another felt that her school had not been understanding about the difficulties she was facing at home:

'I didn't go to school much; if I did I would bunk off the lessons. I had a lot going on in my personal life as well while I was at secondary school so over the last few important years, that to me in my mind was more important than school, and I would rather sort that out than go to school and everything else. I did my exams and I passed three but I know I could have passed them all if I stayed properly, so I suffered in that way but I didn't really attend school much. The only reason I went was to see my friends.'

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

I found the teachers weren't understanding. Before, I went in and said I've got a problem at home – I find it really hard to do my work because of what is going on – and the school were fully aware of my situation but they weren't understanding. Oh you've got to get it done, it only takes two hours in the evening. That's two hours you know – I can't really find that but they weren't willing to help. So I thought well why should I be bothered then.'

These comments only provide one side of the story, and should not necessarily be taken at face value. Teachers might have a different perspective. There can be no doubt that a number of these young women were very opinionated and some exhibited behavioural problems. In the words of one young mother interviewed, they could be 'mouthy'. Some of the young mothers were clear that it was something around their own attitude or approach that had contributed to them disliking and not getting on well at school:

'I think I have quite a short attention span as well. I wasn't a very good learner I don't think, it just went in one ear and out of the other and I just get a bit bored.'

'It's just me really because I used to, like, always go to school and always had to do it, and sometimes I just wanted to rebel and do things.'

It can be very difficult for teachers dealing with large classes, some members of which really don't want to be there. However, this does emphasise the need for alternative approaches to be looked at to help engage such young women in education at an earlier stage. The flexible courses included in this study were beginning to address some of their specific needs, but at rather a late stage in their development.

Another reason for disliking school was the other pupils – personality clashes and just not getting on with others. One young woman described her fellow pupils as '*stupid little girls*'. While some of the problems in this area were due to the attitudes of other pupils, they could also be due to the attitudes of the young women themselves.

Being bullied at school was also reported by a few, and this had put them off wanting to return to, or remain at, school while pregnant and later. This was, however, mentioned far less often than in the study of young mothers not in learning.¹

6.4 Qualifications held

This sample of young women held a range of qualifications. The previous section illustrated how some of the young women had taken their GCSEs, whether attending school regularly or not, while others simply had not bothered. Those who had taken GCSEs had not always gone to find out the results and a few could not remember. Some of the comments suggest a rather laid back approach:

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

'I did mine apart from drama; I think I forgot that day but I didn't get anything above a D in anything.'

On asking further about their qualifications, it often emerged that they had few GCSE passes at grade C or above, as the previous and following quotes illustrate. One young woman, due to disrupted education, had no passes at grade C or above and commented:

'That is what they want, don't they employers? C and above. ... I am capable of it, but I don't have the proof.'

The sample did, however, include a few with good GCSE results – while these had often progressed to college, this was not always the case. Their experiences had not always been straightforward:

'I got 11 or something. I did two languages, I didn't go to a couple of my exams though. I think it was 11, I didn't go to German but I read French and German. I did history and I did one page of the second paper and it was like another language and I said to the examiner, I said: "I wasn't here when this was going on" and he said: "just guess" and I was like, how can I guess, I just can't, so I didn't do that paper so I got – it was ungraded – which was a shame because the first paper I did quite well; I did all my course work for that.'

For many, having left compulsory education with few or mixed GCSEs, they were not in a strong position to find a 'good' job or progress with their education or training, at least without some additional basic education.

An earlier chapter explored what these young women had been doing prior to their current learning activities. A few had been to college and completed a course. Others had attended another flexible learning provision. The qualifications held included a GNVQ in social care, NVQ2 in childcare, a media qualification, certificates of achievement and various basic or key skill qualifications.

7 Childcare

7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores attitudes towards, and the use of, childcare. In contrast to the young mothers interviewed as part of the study looking at those not in learning¹, the majority interviewed for this study did have experience of using childcare. For some, this did not really mean leaving their child as the childcare was on-site and they had ready access to him or her – indeed, those on one course did not seem to see themselves as using childcare. However, the majority were, and their experiences illustrate how confidence in using childcare can develop, often with the right support.

7.2 Care to Learn

A few of the young mothers had family members looking after their child (this was not funded by Care to Learn), and one provider visited was not accessing Care to Learn funding. All the rest (who were in the eligible age range) were using Care to Learn to fund childcare while they were on their course.

One point that emerges is that not all were really clear that they were using Care to Learn funding. For example, one young woman reported that she did not have to pay for the cost of childcare herself. However, she was unclear on how it was funded. When asked whether the funding came from Care to Learn she said: *'Yes, it might be that'*. Many of the young mothers had received help in completing an application for Care to Learn, and therefore might not have clearly engaged with where the funding came from. Where childcare was provided on-site, although young mothers could choose whether or not to use it, everything was often already organised and

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

sorted out for them. In a number of the interviews, young mothers were rather vague about various aspects of their lives. Sometimes they simply did not want to talk about some personal issues, or felt it was not our business. However, others could not remember – for example about their qualifications, or about the exact sources of finance they were accessing.

However, they knew that their childcare was paid for, and without this almost all would have been unable to attend their course. Care to Learn funding was also important in the setting up of many of the courses.

In a few areas, the Care to Learn maximum was reported to be insufficient, but mostly it seemed to cover the costs of the childcare needed. One support worker reported taking a young mother who was a care leaver to view various childcare provision – the young woman had burst into tears. She couldn't believe that there would be funding (through Care to Learn) to place her child in such nice places – she had assumed that what she could afford would be shabby and not well run.

There are still some misconceptions about Care to Learn funding. For example, one young woman said she thought it was just for those aged 19.¹

'But it said it's only for 19s, so I thought I could get it the year after, but it's for under 19s.'

If she had realised it was for under 19 year olds, she might have considered starting a course when 18. This may well not be due to anything to do with the Care to Learn booklet or publicity, but rather that, for example, this particular young person had not read the material properly. It is not possible to say. However, this does emphasise the need for information, especially that aimed at young mothers themselves, to be as simple and straightforward as possible.

One young woman complained that the booklet:

'Didn't explain enough because I was with somebody and I didn't know if I could get it or not.'

This misconception about Care to Learn emerged in the study of young mothers not in learning, where one agency working with young mothers had suggested that they could not receive it if their partner was working.²

There were a few complaints about the forms, for example: *'forms double-dutch'*. The Care to Learn team have made the forms as simple as possible but have to collect a minimum of information to ensure that public money is being properly spent and accounted for. Some of these young women did not perhaps have the patience to focus on, what to them, seemed complex. A few had low levels of literacy. Many were

¹ This was before the age limit was raised to under 20 years of age.

² Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

receiving help from a support worker in completing the form, and sometimes those providing support would complete the form for a young mother. This is very important, and emphasises the need for on-going support in this respect.

7.3 Choosing childcare

A few were using family members to care for their child (not funded by Care to Learn). One young mother reported that her mother was an office cleaner and only worked in the early morning. Her college course started at 11am and while she was on her course her mother looked after her little boy. She reported being reluctant to use formal childcare – either a nursery or a childminder:

'I'm quite funny about him being with strangers.'

Another grandmother was also providing childcare as the young mother did not want to leave her baby with strangers all the time:

'I know from working in a nursery that people just leave their kids all day long. I don't want to do that.'

One young mother reported leaving her child with her own grandmother and her boyfriend:

'I wasn't brave enough to leave him. I just didn't want to leave him with people I didn't know. <named person> ... kept telling me to take him [to childcare] but I wouldn't.'

This reluctance to leave their child with strangers was reported in the study looking at young mothers not in learning¹ and is a fairly typical view. Many of these young mothers had no previous experience of using childcare. Some come from backgrounds where leaving a baby outside the family was viewed unfavourably. Those working with these young mothers had often provided considerable support in finding and selecting childcare. They had to address any reluctance on the behalf of a young mother to leave her baby. However, in a few cases overcoming this was not possible.

A range of nurseries and childminders was being used, and the young women expressed various preferences for each.

Some of the learning provision included in this study had childcare on-site, or used a nursery close by. When a course had been set up specifically for young mothers it had been made as easy as possible for those attending to access childcare. It was recognised that for many leaving their child would be a big step and possibly a barrier to entering learning. As one young mother commented:

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

'It is hard because you are with them every single day; then to leave them with someone you don't know it is hard. I mean, the first day was hard because I kept thinking I know I am going to leave her, she doesn't know what is about to happen. I was really upset but after I left her once it was okay.'

Where childcare was on-site, the young mothers had often been allowed to visit their child whenever they wanted. At first they had made many visits each day, but seeing their child settle had reassured them and they had relaxed about using the provision. They quickly got to know the childcare workers and came to trust them with their child. One support worker running a short course reported that the pilot group did not seem to bond so well and settle with the childcare, although it was on-site. For the second group entering the course, she planned a fuller introduction to the childcare. All the young mothers visited the on-site provision before the course started and were able to discuss things with the nursery staff – this had led to a smoother transition and better relationships between the staff and young mothers.

Where childcare was not on-site, much effort was often put into reassuring a young mother that using childcare would be fine. Visits might be arranged and in some provision pregnant young women were able to learn about childcare from those who had already given birth. One young mother moving on to mainstream provision at a college reported that she had received a lot of help. A support worker accompanied her on visits to several different nurseries. She greatly appreciated this:

'It was really useful just to have another person with me, just in case there were important questions I meant to ask but forgot once I got there.'

For those not using childcare provided on-site and related to the course, the reasons for selecting a particular provider were varied. As with the above example, some had visited a range of provision and selected the one they liked the best. One young mother reported choosing a nursery because it was small and offered a lot of one-to-one attention – it was *'not a big commercial place'*.

Knowing someone who worked there or having somewhere recommended was another reason for selection. One young mother reported that the nursery was recommended by her mother; another chose the nursery because people she knew from school had done their Trident work experience there and had told her they thought it good. Someone on a childcare course commented:

'Well, the place where I work it's two nurseries run by the same people. So I go to one and he's at the other.'

Preferences were split between using a childminder or a nursery – sometimes with no clear reasons:

'I go to college, and then I just nip to the nursery straight across the road. ... and they can play with more children than they can with a childminder.'

'Just wanted to put him in a nursery – he's not been there long at that nursery and it's quite near, really so, and there's lots of other children there as well.'

While some preferred to leave their child near home, others wanted them nearby. Quite a few described the difficulties of travelling on public transport with a child and a pushchair – although this did not seem to be putting them off using that particular childcare provider.

One quote summarises a range of views about the use of childcare:

'As long as they are good ones, I think you have got to find a good one you can trust, has good references because you can never be too careful leaving the kids.'

Despite initial concerns about how their child would settle, cope without being with them and generally get on at the selected childcare, in nearly all cases things had gone well. Their babies had perhaps cried on being left to start with, but most had eventually settled down. To begin with, as reported above, if the childcare was on-site the young mothers were often regular visitors during the day but this fell off as they relaxed about leaving their child and saw them settling well. Where the childcare was not on-site, childcare providers might be happy to have a phone call during the day from a young mother to see how her baby was getting on. One young mother reported how it was *'really cool'* that she could watch her child via a webcam if she wanted to.

An issue was raised by those on a very short course, where the provision was off-site:

'The one that she went to up the road when we went on <name> course was a good one but she didn't settle there though. Because she was not used to being left with strangers and obviously she was only there for a very short period of time, so by the time she was starting to calm down I was going back to pick her up so she was never really getting used to it.'

This was not reported as a widespread issue, but does perhaps suggest a need for some initial childcare to be arranged for longer periods – partly to reassure a young mother.

Over time, the majority of young mothers relaxed and became very positive about using childcare. They welcomed the break from their child and valued the time to do something else, while being sure that their child was safe. They commented positively on the way that if their child was ill or there was a problem, the carer would ring them up; or if the child was ill or unsettled in the morning that they could phone to check up later. One young mother had been delighted and reassured that at the end of each session she was given a report of what had happened during the day, and any particular advances her baby had made – she felt involved in what was happening. They also began to relax – they were not judged as poor mothers for leaving their child, and the childcare providers treated them with respect as a mother, not looking down on, or patronising, them.

The benefits of childcare were also commented on. This particular comment was made during a discussion in a focus group where one young mother was adamantly against leaving her child. Another member of the group commented:

'But nursery is good for them because it gets them to mix with other kids and obviously they start learning quicker and picking more things up other than when they are just at home on their own.'

8 Future Plans

8.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the plans the young women interviewed had for the future, and the impact of the course that they were on at the time of the interview. The majority of those on a course specifically aimed at young mothers reported a growing interest in remaining in learning. They did not always know what or how they would do this. Support workers also commented on the increased motivation to learn amongst the young mothers they had dealings with through these courses. In one area, it was reported that the greater focus on keeping young mothers in learning seemed to have led to a reduction in second pregnancies.

8.2 Future plans

The young mothers interviewed varied considerably in the extent to which they had clear ambitions for the future. For some, more immediate issues were foremost in their minds and, as amongst the young mothers not in learning¹, a number wanted to be a full-time mother until their child was older:

'I think we are moving and once my little boy goes to school I will think about wanting a career and everything, and we are getting married next year. That's it really.'

'Back to work, I think. I am not quite sure I want to do it until my daughter is at school; definitely go back to work and then I don't really know – I thought about doing something to help people but then I think I want to do something for me – I want to do something I will enjoy. I do think about going to college to study dance but I am just not sure; I am really not sure what I want to do.'

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

'I want to be a midwife but I don't want to do it yet. I did want to but I would like to wait until my youngest is at least in full-time nursery or at school because the amount of hours you've got to put in, it is not fair just to palm the baby off but as well the [NHS] is in a bit of a state at the moment with their health services so Good at qualifying now by getting a job afterwards so I just thought I am going to put that off for a little while because I am only 20 and last year people in their 40s and 50s qualified as midwives. I can do that later but I would like to do something else before, just part time. I don't know if that will be studying or a job or something. I want to do something so that I gain something.'

'Really get the pair of them into a nursery and school, and I would like to train to be a drug worker. That is the aim at the moment. ... I haven't got a clue [how to do this] at the moment. I am taking a back seat with that at the moment. I am still toying with some ideas but that is what I am looking at wanting to do. [Do you think the project team can help you?] Yes because they have links with <organisation name> which is an alcohol and drug centre – that sort of stuff, so I would need to find out what I need first before I go.'

However, many were clear that they wanted to do something that would help their children, and a few commented that they wanted their children to be proud of them:

'Yes, so I have something for my children as well. Hopefully, if I get another qualification that will help with a better paid job. If I could get a nice job now a couple of days a week that would be the answer.'

Although by no means all wanted to continue or remain in learning, there was a strong element of being interested in further learning. Those running and supporting courses commented on how they noticed an increased interest in learning as the young mothers attending progressed through the course. As was reported in the chapter looking at reasons for going on a course, boredom and being taken there by someone else were important factors. While wanting to improve their qualifications and eventually find a good job was part of the motivation, it did not seem to be key. The courses were aiming to engage young mothers and support them in accessing further learning.

Those on the courses were using them in various ways. Some really wanted to improve their existing qualifications and become better placed to find a good job – they were using the course to strengthen their position in this respect. Some were biding their time until they could start another course – for example, they had already registered on a course but there was a gap of several months before it started, or they were thinking about applying for a course in the next academic year.

Others, especially those on the shorter and most informal courses, were often further from making a clear decision to remain in learning. They were happy attending for a few hours and with the activities they were involved in there. This does not mean that these courses were not having a positive impact on the young women, but rather, that they were playing a slightly different role from that of some other courses.

A third group had started attending their course for the range of reasons discussed earlier in this report, and had gradually become more confident in their abilities and more motivated to do something positive with their lives. The support and advice they received played a key role in this. Course organisers would bring in someone to speak about the options available at various local colleges, and Connexions PAs might attend regularly. Young mothers were being given relevant information and the encouragement that they needed to realise they could attend college. Purely fortuitously, one course involved one day a week at the local college. A number of those attending had never been in the college before and some were very nervous about entering the building. However, doing so with a supportive group removed this barrier. Having lunch in the refectory meant they were potentially meeting and mixing with other students, reducing another barrier to their progressing.

Most courses were providing some accreditation and this took many forms. Some were taking or re-taking GCSEs, and gaps in literacy and numeracy were being filled. Certificates of achievement and similar qualifications were giving some young mothers the first accreditation ever. All this could help boost confidence in their own abilities, and give them the evidence they needed to start applying for a course.

Some still had a long way to go, in terms of gaining sufficient qualifications or improving their confidence, before they would be really able to survive and cope on a mainstream course. These needed a range of on-going supportive provision, which was not always available. Others had only relatively recently started their current course, and had not yet really developed clear aspirations or plans for the future.

Nevertheless, a number of the young women interviewed did report clear aspirations for the future. They talked about wanting to study a range of vocational courses at college which would then place them in a better position to obtain employment. For example, they wanted to work in beauty therapy, office work, childcare, interior design, health and social care. Others wanted to study at university, and several wanted to do this so that they could become a midwife.

Although it is important not to over generalise, there were generally more positive statements about plans to continue with their learning amongst this group, compared to the views on learning expressed by those not in learning.¹

There were also many similarities. Both groups of respondents talked about not really knowing what they wanted to do, especially on leaving school, although the young women interviewed as part of this study were often clearer at the time of the interviews. They had changed their minds many times about the type of job they wanted to aim for. A number had studied on several, often vocational, courses that seemed to show no real progression, in that the subjects were unrelated and did not

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

seem to be leading in a coherent direction. Part of this was experimentation. They did not know what they wanted to do and so tried different things as their aspirations evolved. A few talked about wanting to have a range of skills to draw on.

Another theme that emerges from both studies is the influence that those working with young mothers have on them. This is not just in terms of the advice and support they give, but also through acting as positive role models in the type of work they do. For example, some young mothers reported wanting to be a midwife, others wanted to work with young mothers like themselves. The courses had also introduced young women to a range of other career options. For example, helping those with drug and alcohol problems was mentioned by some. This sometimes came from their own personal experiences, but was also a topic covered on many courses that seemed to particularly engage these young women.

A further theme is that many young women do not know how to go about entering particular careers or learning institutions. In some of the focus groups, there were broader discussions about how difficult it was to decide what they wanted to do, to find out what qualifications were needed for particular careers, or the job opportunities open to those who obtained particular qualifications. Those running the courses and generally supporting young mothers would often include coverage and discussion of these issues, perhaps using external speakers and other input, to help young mothers become more focused and better informed. A number of the courses also included activities that aimed to help the young mothers understand themselves better – this could also help them to explore what they wanted out of their lives, what they would enjoy doing and be good at, and how to reach this position.

The study also included some who were clearly highly motivated. A few of these were on one or other of the courses aimed specifically at young mothers. However, most were on mainstream courses at a college. They had utilised various support on offer to enter college, sort out their finances, etc. However, they often showed stronger motivations to simply deal with the challenges of studying and being a mother, and this has been reflected in quotes used elsewhere in this report.

8.3 Barriers to learning

Once deciding that they wanted to continue studying, the young mothers could still face a range of barriers to doing so. They often continued to need a range of support and advice – this might be practical in nature but also motivational, ensuring that they did not just give up. Support workers and the young women themselves talked about the difficulties in remaining motivated if they had to take a break in learning. For example, some courses specifically for young mothers ended a few months before a young mother could start a college course. Without something to keep them involved and someone to motivate them, interest in further learning could dwindle during this period.

At one college, it was suggested that young mothers who were not ready to do a full-time course or who did not want to leave their child in childcare should fill the time by attending evening classes. This works well for some; however, others still need some sort of support to keep them interested and motivated in attending.

This section outlines the range of barriers that young mothers still faced in accessing learning. Childcare remained an issue. Some were approaching 20 and were concerned about how they would pay for childcare once they were no longer eligible for Care to Learn. There seemed to be little knowledge that Learner Support Funds (LSF) in colleges do provide some support for childcare. One respondent commented on the differences between paying for childcare if she was working compared to studying:

'When you go back to work if you are on a low income – my partner works but if you are on a low income combined – when I did go back to work I got 70 per cent of it paid for by Child Tax Credits, but if I wanted to go back to education the tax credits wouldn't pay 70 per cent of my childcare then. Which [ie going back to education] is what I ideally want to do. I can get a job now but it is not going to be well paid.'

The expense of childcare was mentioned, and a limited availability of places in some areas. Insufficient on-site childcare was one theme. Some learning providers do not have any on-site provision; in others it was not available for babies under the age of two and, where it did exist, it was nearly always in great demand. Taking a child to college on public transport creates its own challenges. However, young mothers and those working with them commented on the need for, and difficulties of, additional travel between three points – home, childcare and college – especially where there were few childcare places near home.

Juggling being a mother and studying was commented on as a further barrier. Those who are perhaps less motivated or committed to their course are likely to give up more easily than others. This, again, emphasises the need for on-going support. One young mother who was highly motivated and on a clear career track said that there is no doubt it is difficult both studying and being a mother. She described how she had to be very organised, getting the baby and all his things ready every morning then dropping him off at nursery before college, finding time to do homework later while making sure he kept to his routine, and this was alongside sometimes being tired from broken nights. She felt it takes a determination many do not have. The fact that she had always had a long-term career goal had helped her. She commented on how she found it easy to see how others who have never had many goals for themselves drift into just staying at home and end up on benefits.

Learning providers vary considerably in the extent to which they are understanding and flexible in catering for young mothers. This has been discussed elsewhere in the report. Having started a course, remaining on it was not always straightforward. Some reported difficulties that seemed to be more related to their overall attitudes and approach than to their being a mother. Support workers reported having to intervene

to help young mothers who had been absent because their child was ill, making it difficult for them to meet deadlines. Once in mainstream learning, a whole range of factors can emerge that young mothers will continue to need help with.

Not being given a timetable or information on days that they had to attend college had created problems for some young mothers. This meant that they were unable to book childcare in advance – sometimes there were no places left once they knew their timetable. While one option might be to book a full-time place, not all wanted to do so and the Care to Learn weekly allowance would not always cover the cost of this.

One example is that of a young woman who wanted to do an Access course. The induction wasn't until two weeks before the course started and the college couldn't say which days the course was going to be on. The course was only two days a week, and she wanted to spend the other three with her child so couldn't sign him up full time. When she did know which days the course ran on there wasn't a nursery that she could reach using public transport, so she had to drop-out that year:

'Yes, I went for the interview in June and the induction date was the end of August and I kept ringing them up in the meantime saying, you know: "can you tell me what day it is going to be?" and it was: "oh, we don't know, you are going to have to find out on your induction day". I said: "the problem is I've got two really young children, one of my children is under one", so they said: "we can't help" ... everything is up in the air and when we went on our induction day they gave us our days but they said it is subject to change as well. So the days – I think it was Wednesday and Thursday – it was only 11am-1pm on both days but I still couldn't get the childcare for that.'

Others had faced a range of problems in returning to learning which were not necessarily related to their being a mother, such as courses being cancelled. One young mother had tried to attend an evening class but it had been cancelled twice due to insufficient numbers.

The attitudes of family and partners were reported, by support workers rather than the young mothers themselves, as another barrier to learning. One Connexions PA based in a college discussed having to work with young fathers to try and persuade them that the mother of their child should and could attend a college course. The cultural issues discussed in the report on young mothers not in learning¹ also emerged as a barrier. Examples were given of young women who against strong family opposition had decided to study at college and put their child in childcare. This took a strong and determined personality.

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

Other young women were more interested in finding a job than returning to learning. However, they, too, commented on the barriers they faced:

'I think they should make it easier to get into work because everywhere I read you must have this experience, that qualification and everything else. I think it is quite hard to get in these days because where do you start getting the experience in the first place? Especially if you are a mother because you have taken so many years out, and I had my first when I was 17 and I worked for a year before that, so I didn't really.'

'We are all a bit nervous about going back to work. I have been out of work for four years now. I think I am feeling a bit held back now because I am a bit nervous of going back.'

'I look at the job paper every week and every time I see something I like it says you must have this, you must have that and it puts me off. I don't want to embarrass myself by applying for it and then they are sitting there saying: "oh you haven't got this, you haven't got that". I think a lot of people can do it you know, without the experience or qualifications. I haven't got any qualifications but I am intelligent enough to do a good job. We all are really.'

The problems of low pay and being able to earn enough to survive were also discussed. For example, one young woman had her child when she was 14 and still at school. After giving birth she had returned to school and achieved good GCSEs and three A-levels. She was highly motivated and wanted to work. However, her rent is over £200 a week and she would need to earn a higher salary than she can find to come off benefits. At the time of the interview she was considering going to university.

9 Discussion and Conclusions

This part of the Care to Learn evaluation involved interviews at 12 different learning providers and with some young mothers attending all but one of these. The provision varied in nature, including mainstream college courses and courses specifically set up to address the needs of young mothers. Young mothers had accessed these courses through a range of routes, and wanting to be engaged in learning was often not a key motivation. These provisions did help young mothers become more motivated around returning to further learning or entering employment. They still, however, faced a range of barriers – practical and motivational – that they needed further support with.

A number of themes emerge from the data explored in this report and these are each discussed below.

The key importance of support and advice

The majority of the young mothers interviewed were receiving intensive, individualised support. This might be around sorting out practical issues such as housing and benefits. A very important aspect was its motivational content. Some of these young mothers had been very disengaged from statutory education and a number had few or poor qualifications. They were not particularly motivated and did not always have very clear aspirations before they were pregnant. Becoming a mother had varying impacts. For many, this changed their views on the importance of becoming qualified and finding good employment. However, given their past experiences in education, they did not have the preparation in terms of information and qualifications to access learning. A number simply could not see themselves entering learning.

Where young women were on a course specifically aimed at young mothers, an important part of this was the support provided by those running the course and others who came in to advise on specific issues. The topics young women required help with were wide ranging – some they would bring up themselves, while others

were identified by support workers. For example, support workers were dealing with issues around a history of abuse, being in residential care, post-natal (and other forms of) depression, behaviour and attitudinal issues for the young mother, and the behaviour of their child. Some of these issues could be discussed within the group and sometimes external help was needed (for example through referral to another agency). Addressing all these issues was important to help a young mother continue in and benefit from learning.

Support workers also did much work motivating young mothers to learn and return to work. They were not trying to deny these young women the right to be a mother and spend time with their child, but they were aiming to inform them about other options, or options that they might want to think about for later (eg when the child was older). Sometimes the young women were not ready at first to hear about studying on a mainstream course, but gradually they might become motivated and want to find out more. At this stage, course organisers would start providing information on courses, what it was like to study at a college, other training options and so on. They might also work with particular young women on a more one-to-one basis to increase their confidence and self-esteem.

Those running these courses often commented on how they could see young mothers become more motivated through attending the course and be prepared to look at broader options.

The need for support did not always stop with the entry to college. Once on a mainstream course, young mothers might face issues around their attendance (or inability to do so because their child was ill), meeting deadlines and coping with the work. Support workers talked about how they help young mothers negotiate with their course tutors – to establish the boundaries at the start and to address problems as they arose.

This is not to say that all young mothers need on-going support. A few of those interviewed were highly motivated and confident – they were largely able to cope with the demands of combining study and childcare. However, having someone to call on if a problem did arise could be important. For the majority of young women interviewed, broader and on-going support will probably be necessary. They were not used to the disciplines of studying on a regular basis. A few had some attitudinal and behavioural issues which could mean that settling into study (or indeed a job) will not be straightforward for them.

The need for varied provision

Looking first at the courses specifically provided for young mothers, although these could be broadly grouped, what comes out of this study (and that looking at young

mothers not in learning¹) is the wide range of different types of provision that are available, in some areas, for young mothers. However, while some areas are relatively well catered for, others have very little or only specific types of provision.

The nature of the organisations running these courses and the locations in which they were run were varied, and this is important. The provision was largely informal, and run in informal locations. It is important that this remains the case and that such provision does not become institutionalised. The less-motivated young mothers, and those who have bad memories of school, and perhaps college, will not be attracted into formal, 'official' locations. For some, it had been nerve-racking enough on their first day as it was.

Taking the learning provision into local communities is very important, although this may only really be possible in areas with relatively high rates of teenage pregnancy.

This does not mean that no such provision should be in colleges – there are some very successful initiatives in colleges. One included in this study was only using the college one day a week. The young women attended at a more informal location on two other days, and this was important. However, having some time at college was also helping to overcome prejudices and fears around entering a college building.

Another important feature of learning provision for young mothers is that it is on-going. For example, unless college term dates can become more flexible – for example allowing more than one intake a year (which seems unlikely) – something that keeps young mothers engaged will be needed. While some will go out and find a positive way to spend their time, others admitted themselves that they needed something to be available for them. One respondent suggested that young mothers could access evening classes to tide them over. While this might work (and does work very well) for some, others were not interested and would be unlikely to benefit from such provision.

Provision needs to be progressive and provide steps for moving on. For example, to engage very disengaged young mothers, very informal provision, perhaps hardly touching on learning, is necessary. However, as their confidence and motivation grow they need something to move on to – attending a formal college course is often too big a step.

A proportion of young mothers were disengaged from education before they became pregnant, often at a relatively young age. It is important that this is addressed for all young people – it is difficult for these to return to learning later, since they have often missed out too much to be able to easily fit back into mainstream courses. However, for some under-16 year old young mothers, becoming pregnant led to them becoming re-engaged. Once pregnant, a plan was developed for their inclusion in education

¹ Dench S, Bellis A, Tuohy S (2007), *Young Mothers Not in Learning. A qualitative study of barriers and attitudes*, IES Report 439.

(whether or not they had been disengaged before). Those who really would not, or could not, attend school had alternative arrangements made for them. Where PRUs or some other form of alternative courses were available, these were often very successful in ensuring that these young women finished compulsory education with at least some qualifications and perhaps a more positive attitude to learning that they would have done otherwise.

The nature of the curriculum and learning environment

The courses provided specifically for young mothers, although varying in their precise nature, had a range of factors in common. All these were an important part of their attraction to young people and their success.

Learning was provided in an informal environment, those attending were able to progress at their own rate, and help with the learning was available to the extent they needed. The learning was based around topics of interest and relevance to the young mothers – for example, relating to budgeting, caring for a young child, child development, healthy eating, etc. Through such topics they might also develop literacy and numeracy skills. Some courses included an element of learning within the group – they would discuss various topics, bringing their own experiences to bear.

The young mothers were mostly learning in small groups, and again this was important. It enabled them to receive individual attention as needed, and also ensured that they did not become 'lost' in a large classroom situation where their needs could not be identified.

There is some debate as to whether young mothers need provision that is separate from other young people or not. It could be argued that they should be included in more general provision to help people return to learning – and no doubt some are. However, one thing the young women valued about the learning was that they were with others in the same situation as themselves. They understood where each other was coming from, did not feel judged and could relate to each other, sharing problems and experiences. There can be no doubt that the support needs of young mothers are very varied, and not just related to their being a mother. However, the specific issues they have to deal with around accessing and using childcare, and combining looking after their family with other responsibilities, are unique to this group – and do involve particular types of support and advice.

Most of the learning provision was not, however, without rules. For example, there were rules about attendance, except for in the most informal groups. If a young mother was not going to attend one day she was expected to phone in before a certain time, and to give a reason. While a few complained about this, the general feeling was that as long as the rules were clear and fair this was fine. They realised that when in a job they could not just disappear if they or their child were ill, and this provided an opportunity for them to develop a routine.

The rapport that many young mothers had developed with their course organiser, and often other professionals who came in to give information and advice, was also very important. Much credit must go to those who run these courses and work with young mothers for the success that is achieved.

On-going barriers to learning

Despite a range of courses helping young mothers become more motivated and able to learn, there remain a number of barriers to learning. These are not just faced by the less motivated; young mothers who are highly motivated to learn can also experience a range of difficulties around accessing and remaining in learning.

Cultural factors, negative pressures from family and friends, their own desire to be a full-time mother, still having few qualifications, few aspirations and a lack of confidence can all work against young mothers continuing or progressing their learning. They also often have a host of practical issues around housing and benefits, for example, that need to be resolved before they can think about moving into learning.

There are other barriers that limit the nature of learning opportunities open to young mothers. Although many learning providers aim to be as flexible as they can within certain constraints, flexibility around young mothers, and an understanding of their particular circumstances and needs, also vary within such institutions. For example, although those working directly with young mothers do what they can and intervene as necessary to support young mothers on mainstream courses, some departments or even individual tutors within a department are less understanding or prepared to give less leeway. There are ways in which colleges, for example, could cater more fully for young mothers. A key issue that emerged is that of timetables not always being available until the start of term. This makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for a young mother to make childcare arrangements in advance. Furthermore, some tutors allow no flexibility in attendance – saying, for example, that this would be the case if the young person was working. However, the young mothers studying had often only recently become a mother and they were often having to deal with a range of problems in their everyday lives. A bit more flexibility at this early stage could make the difference between their completing a course and moving on, or being unable to progress.

Funding

A range of different funding was being accessed by the different learning providers visited in the course of this study. Some had (at least relatively) long-term stability, while others were regularly having to reapply or find alternatives. From April 2007, the LSC is putting £4 million into YMTB and young parents courses – this is to be welcomed as such courses have such an important role to play in supporting young parents into learning.

Care to Learn

A few of the young mothers interviewed were using a family member to care for their child while they were learning. However, the majority were using formal childcare. Care to Learn was paying for most of this, although sometimes the young women were not very sure of the source of the funding they were using. Care to Learn funding was important in the setting up of some courses. It was enabling other courses to expand and/or continue running.

Nearly all the young mothers said they would not be able to access learning without Care to Learn funding. A number were approaching their 20th birthday and were very concerned about how they would return to further learning if not able to do so before this birthday. There was limited knowledge of the funding alternatives (eg LSF) which, in any case, often pay less than Care to Learn because of their limited availability.