

Key findings in relation to the role of Reintegration Officers in helping pregnant young women and young mothers and school age continue or re-engage with education
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Briefing paper:

Re-engagement and re-integration of pregnant young women and young mothers of school age

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The issue of supporting teenage parents to return to education was raised as an issue of policy concern within the SEU report on Teenage pregnancy¹. The Standards Fund was the Government's main channel for targeting funds towards national priorities to be delivered by LEAs. In 2000 the Standards Fund Grant Teenage pregnancy was launched in 48 LEAs with the explicit aim of helping to reintegrate pregnant young women and mothers of school age back into education and provide support to pregnant teenagers and school-age parents in education. The grant was subsequently made available in another 41 LEAs.

There have been overwhelming positive findings from an evaluation of the implementation of this grant². A major finding of this research was the invaluable role played by the Reintegration Officer in a number of key ways including:

- breaking down barriers to education including issues relating to childcare and transport,
- working with educational establishments to change prevailing negative perceptions of pregnant young women and young mothers at an institutional level and develop quick and effective methods of referral,
- working with young women to capitalise on renewed motivation to succeed for the sake of their child.

As of April 2003, the Standards Fund Grant: Teenage Pregnancy becomes un-ring fenced funding contained within the newly named Vulnerable Children's Grant. As such it is important to highlight that this funding should not only continue to fund the work of established Reintegration Officers but also make funds available in areas previously not in receipt of these funds to develop this role with their LEA.

The research team involved in the initial evaluation would like to explicitly state that within the changing nature of the new grant it is important that the role of Reintegration Officers does not come under threat as a result of the change in funding arrangements.

The remainder of this briefing outlines the key findings of the DfES funded research which monitored the introduction of the original grant, and provides a solid evidence base for the continuation of (and future development of more) Reintegration Officer posts.

¹ Social Exclusion Unit [SEU] (1999) **Teenage Pregnancy**, London: The Stationery Office.

² Selman et al. (2001) **Monitoring of the Standards Fund Grant: Teenage Pregnancy**, Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Selman, Richardson, Speak and Hosie from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne monitored six areas in receipt of the Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant, (Durham, Leeds, Newham, Northumberland, Sandwell and Southwark), in order to explore each LEA's use of The Grant and the developing role and effectiveness of the Reintegration Officer.

Background

A central objective of the Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant was intended to be the 'reintegration' of young women conceiving whilst of statutory school age, back into education. The appointment of a Reintegration Officer for each of the 48 LEAs provided with The Grant who would co-ordinate local provision, help to break down any barriers to reintegration and provide support for school aged young women who were pregnant or mothers, was seen as a key element in achieving this goal. Six areas were monitored in-depth by the research team in order to explore: the process of development and the effectiveness of Reintegration Officers; the experiences of young women who were pregnant or mothers before and after the introduction of The Grant; the value of different types of educational provisions for young mothers of compulsory school-age and to highlight evidence of good practice in breaking down barriers to education.

Prior to the existence of The Grant, pregnant young women and mothers of school age within the six LEAs had a limited range of approaches available to them regarding their continued education. In Sandwell almost all pregnant young women would attend a specialist Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), whilst in Durham three part-time units were available for the maternity-leave period of a young woman's pregnancy. In the remaining four areas, the main options were either mainstream school or home tuition. A number of key issues of concern were raised by the Reintegration Officers regarding the policy and processes in operation, prior to their arrival:

Key points prior to Standards Fund Grant

- LEAs knew very little about the numbers, educational activities and/or needs of pregnant young women and young mothers.
- Many young women would fail to receive home tuition because their schools were unaware of correct procedure or trying to conceal that there was a pregnancy at their school.
- A significant proportion of young women in all areas had effectively dis-engaged themselves from school education or were erratic attenders prior to pregnancy, therefore:
 - Without adequate follow-up on non-attendance, most LEAs did not respond to a young woman's need regarding pregnancy, because they were unaware the need existed.
 - Reintegration efforts would often fail, as previous non-attendees did not wish to return to a school that they had already dis-engaged from.

- Evidence of bad practice in the following areas was found in a number of LEAs:
 - Off-rolling of pregnant young women.
 - Incorrect attendance records at school.
 - Forced 29-week maternity leave.
 - Admission refusals for Year 11 mothers who had missed a substantial amount of Year 10.
 - Pregnant young women and young mothers being made to feel unwelcome and hence choosing to leave of their own accord,
 - Pregnant young women being told, that on health and safety grounds, school was not the best place for them.
- Many schools did not see it as their duty to make sure that pregnant young women and young mothers were comfortable at school, nor to facilitate flexible or alternative provision to encourage their continued engagement.

Reintegration

“I think this idea of blanket reintegration is wrong. There are distinct categories - you’ve got good attendees, erratic attendees and you’ve got non-attendees, you’ve got people who’ve disengaged long before pregnancy and people who’ve disengaged around pregnancy, people who haven’t disengaged... it’s much more complex” (Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Initiative Co-ordinator, Leeds).

The term ‘reintegration’ assumes that a young woman was integrated prior to pregnancy. This was often found not to be the case, which is a key point to acknowledge as it seriously affects the type of educational provision, which may be appropriate for a young mother on reintegration.

Whilst some young mothers felt well supported by their school, more often negative experiences arose from a school’s unwillingness to be flexible on timetabling and in the lack of personal support offered by teachers. Generally those in receipt of education at a specialist provision commented very favourably on the education received and the social support provided, reflected by exceptionally high attendance rates. However some noted limitations in the range of subjects that a specialist unit could provide in comparison to mainstream school. Most often home tuition was not viewed favourably due to its poor quality, but in practice it was often the only viable option particularly in large geographical areas or for those young mothers wishing to remain at home for the first few months to bond with their child.

The Reintegration Officer: establishment, development and effectiveness

Despite a relatively short time in post, all Reintegration Officers made significant achievements in their LEAs. Each Officer adopted a different approach dependent on what systems were/ were not in place prior to their arrival. The achievements across all 6 LEAs can be summarised as follows:

- **Raising awareness** within the LEA of the broader issues and in individual schools of their obligations towards pregnant young women and young mothers.

- **Establishing procedures** for the referral of pregnant young women and school age mothers to the Reintegration Officer and other education providers and monitoring of progress.
 - Many schools noted relief that there was now a named officer to whom they could refer young women or ask advice and support.
- **Data collection** on individual pregnant young women and young mothers, the outcome of their pregnancy and their education progress and achievements.
- **Overcoming barriers to reintegration** into mainstream and alternative provision and post-16 options.
 - One of the largest barriers to overcome was that of prevailing negative perceptions of pregnant young women at an institutional level.
 - Many teachers noted the direct effect that Reintegration Officers were having on positively changing attitudes of staff towards pregnant young women and young mothers.
- **Altering negative routes through education** by establishing new forms of provision as alternatives to mainstream school and home tuition (i.e. FE college) or by changing attitudes and behaviour of young women and/or educational establishments to encourage new positive routes.
- **Improving attendance** within both mainstream and alternative provision and both before and after the birth.
 - Improvements were most noted amongst those young women who were poor/ erratic/ non-attendees or permanently excluded prior to becoming pregnant.
- **General support** including advocacy, parenting and relationship support.
 - Supporting pregnant young women by facilitating an atmosphere where they are allowed to enjoy their pregnancy and the prospect of motherhood, instead of continually being condemned for having done something wrong, is crucial to the ongoing development of self-esteem.
- **Changing mothers' perceptions of education**, in many cases successfully capitalising on renewed motivation to succeed for the sake of the child, although this was often dependant on other factors including local context, a mother's pre-conception experience of education and the different forms of education on offer in any LEA.
- **Improvement in educational attainment** for those already engaged prior to pregnancy remained high. The greatest improvement was seen in the proportions of previous erratic/ non-attendees entered for and passing qualifications.
- **Improvement in non-education attainment.** This was noted amongst many young women, in particular, in relation to improved post-birth contraceptive use, raised self-esteem and the development of sound parenting skills.

How else could the LEA perform the Reintegration function?

Many initiatives have been launched in recent years to help support young people in education: the Standards Fund Teenage Pregnancy Grant was the first to have had a specific remit to work solely with teenage parents. The value of having a named person with the specific task of raising awareness, establishing procedures and changing attitudes at LEA and school level, whilst at the same time working directly with young women, cannot be made explicit enough.

In addition, the non-educational role played by the Reintegration Officer is, in many cases, as important for encouraging the engagement of pregnant young women and young mothers with education, as is the local support and educational provision context.

What would improve the Reintegration Officer's effectiveness?

In order for a Reintegration Officer to be effective in encouraging young women post-conception to continue engagement or to re-engage with education, there must be a range of suitable forms of provision available to offer. 'Flexible provision' has been highlighted as a key issue of importance, particularly for those dis-engaged from mainstream school prior to pregnancy.

The insecure nature of short-term posts does not help Reintegration Officers to plan their future work effectively. The negative impact this has, especially when working with young people, cannot be overstated. If Reintegration Officers posts are not confirmed for several years at a time, it is very likely that if the posts were removed, the work of Reintegration Officers would be undone within a year or two.

What can be learned from the process?

Two key lessons have been highlighted: first, role development and evolution based on local context highlights the need for flexibility and the fact that no one model suits all areas. Second, uncertainty over the future of Reintegration Officers has meant that they could not plan effectively and in some cases were making promises to young mothers for example - over childcare provision - which could not actually be guaranteed. Encouraging young women to trust in an institution that has often already failed them, only to be let down by the short-notice discontinuation of a Reintegration Officer post would effectively undo, any progress that had been made.

For further details regarding this research or current TPU funded research into the educational experiences of pregnant young women and young mothers of school age in England, please contact:

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