



Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

10 September 2008

Report from the Director of Policy and Regeneration

For Action

Wards Affected:
ALL

Interim task group findings on involving parents and faith groups in talking to young people about sex and relationships.

1.0 Summary

- 1.1 This report sets out the interim findings of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny task group investigation into involving faith groups and parents in promoting positive messages about sex and relationships amongst young people.

2.0 Recommendations

- 2.1 The committee are asked to comment on the task groups interim findings.

3.0 Background

- 3.1 Reducing teenage pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases has been a government priority for well over a decade. In the mid 1990's startling figures revealed that, the UK has the highest teenage pregnancy levels in Western Europe. As a result, the Government set ambitious targets to halve the rate by 2010.
- 3.2 A report on teenage pregnancy in Brent came to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 October 2007. It highlighted that although rates in Brent were among the highest in the country, the rates are now on a downward trajectory.

- 3.3 Last year, the national teenage pregnancy support team visited the council and recommended that Brent would benefit from a greater focus on the preventative agenda.
- 3.4 To this end, Members agreed that a task group could usefully focus on how the council can involve parents and faith groups on spreading positive messages amongst young people about sex and relationships. This would help to develop consistent messages between professionals and key groups that influence young people's behaviour.

Remit / Membership of the task group

- 3.5 The task group agreed to focus on the following areas:
- Identify if current information on teenage pregnancy and sexual health meets the needs of parents and faith organisations.
- Consider how parents and faith communities can be supported in talking to their children about relationships and sexual health.
- Identify good practice from other local authorities on their work with these groups and consider if it could be implemented in Brent.
- 3.6 The membership of the task group reflected the subject under review and provided a wide range of experiences. As well as representation from each of the political parties, the task group also included representatives from:
- Brent Multi Faith Forum
A Parent Governor
Brent Youth Parliament
- The Young People's Sexual Health Advice and Support manager attended the meetings to advise the task group.

Task Group Research

- 4.0 The task group has consulted as widely as possible and has so far carried out the following activities:
- Met with local faith groups
 - Met with parents of young parents
 - Met with Kingsbury High School Parents Forum
 - Met with Brent Multi Faith Forum
 - Undertaken desktop review of current reports on teenage pregnancy and sexual health and good practice from other authorities.
 - A questionnaire exploring issues around sex and relationships has been distributed to the Brent Youth Parliament.

Task Group Findings

- 4.1 Government research highlights that vulnerable teenage girls including those who have experienced poverty and poor educational outcomes, are more susceptible to becoming pregnant. Once they have become so, statistics highlight a vicious circle of limited life chances.
- 4.2 Many young people are confused about messages on sex and relationships. On the one hand the media display sexualised images glamorising sexual behaviour and at the same time adults are telling them to delay sexual activity.
- 4.3 Research on the causes of teenage pregnancy highlights that if young people do not receive information from reliable sources such as parents or teachers they are most likely to turn to their friends or the media. This can lead to misinformation and damaging myths about sex and its consequences.
- 4.4 The task group were informed that some faith leaders do not talk to young people about sex and relationships as there is a wrongly held view that it would be a form of promotion and will encourage young people to engage in sexual activity. Many also believe that all young people within their congregations are observant of their religious teaching and therefore not having sex.
- 4.5 Faith communities are also reluctant to distribute condoms or spread safe sex messages as they believe that people should only be having sex within marriage relationships.
- 4.6 Some parents prefer to withdraw their children from sex and relationships education in schools. This is because the teaching does not conform to their beliefs and could contain elements which would be unacceptable within some faiths, such as nudity which is forbidden within Islam.
- 4.3 Unlike other Western European nations, British families often find it difficult to talk to their children about sex and relationships. Yet research shows that young people who make the most positive decisions are those who are able to discuss issues and concerns with those who are closest to them¹.
- 4.4 A report by Parentline Plus² highlighted that a generation gulf now exists between parents and young people. Young people have become sexually active at an ever younger age, thus widening the gap between parental and adolescent experiences. Furthermore, young people tend to have had more sexual partners than people who are now in their twenties and thirties, again opening up the generational divide.
- 4.5 Some parents felt that although they had provided enough support and information for their children around sex and relationships, unplanned pregnancies still resulted. Parents told the task group that they would benefit from additional support from teaching within schools as well as support from

¹ Teenage Pregnancy: A Church Problem, Revd Canon Jane Fraser, 2006.

² Talking about Sex and Relationships: What parents worry about. Parentline Plus, 2003

relevant faith leaders. This can help to reinforce messages that young people are receiving from home.

5.0 Emerging Recommendations

- 5.1 The task group are considering recommendations in the following areas:
- 5.2 There is a need to develop a co-ordinated approach to engaging with the faith communities on this issue. Information on talking to young people about sex and relationships needs to be available in both printed and electronic format and could be incorporated with existing information on teenage issues such as drugs and alcohol.
- 5.3 The council should include faith information when gathering statistical data for rates of terminations, live births and sexually transmitted diseases. This will provide an evidence base to demonstrate how the faith community are affected by this issue.
- 5.4 Parents need the opportunity to get together to discuss and share ideas on talking to young people about sex and relationships. The extended schools initiative could provide a forum for such discussions.

6.0 Next Steps

- 6.1 The task group will be meeting with a representative from the Brent Primary Care Trust to discuss joint working in developing co-ordinated messages around sex and relationships.
- 6.2 The final report of this task group will be considered at the next meeting of the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

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