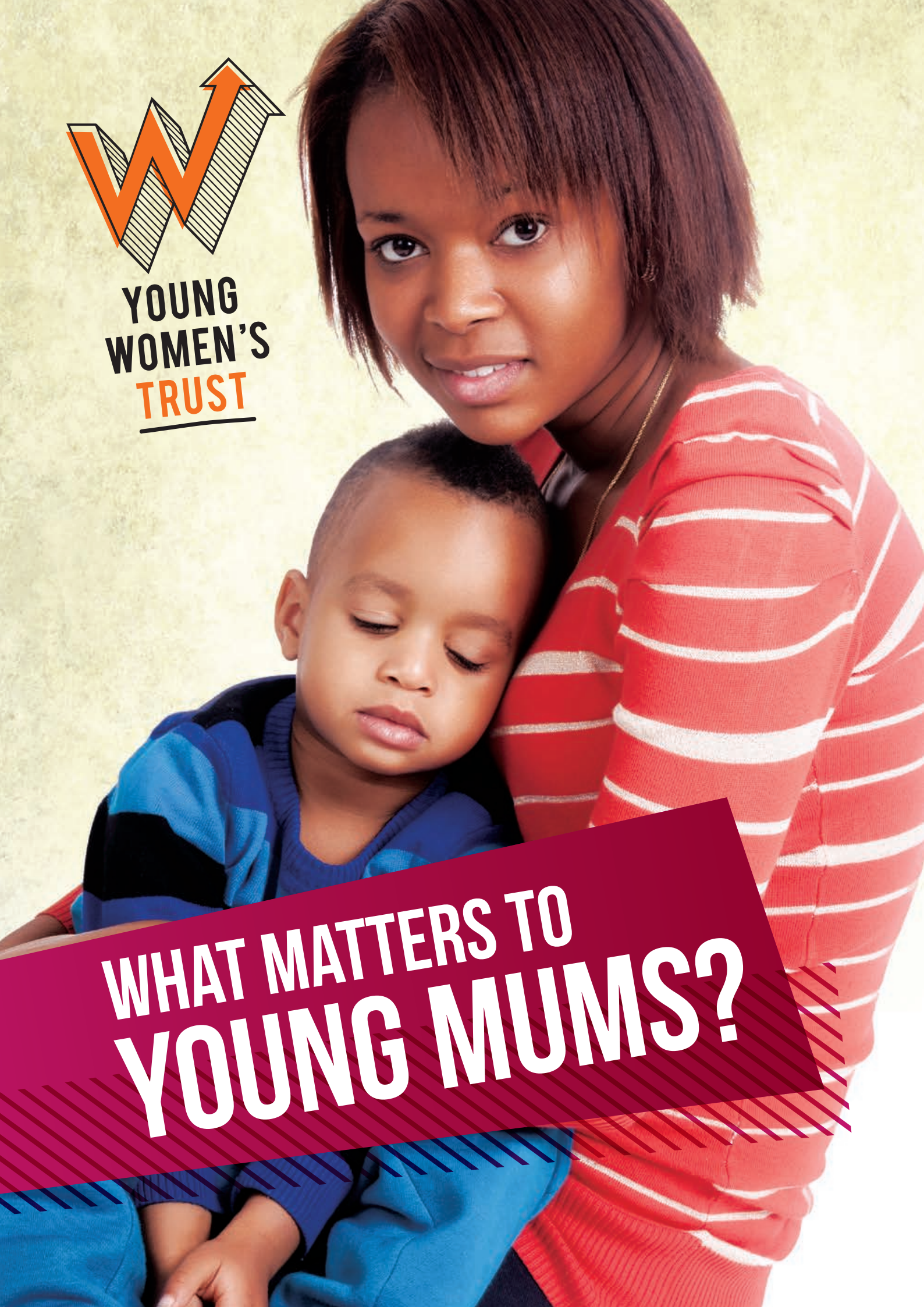




**YOUNG
WOMEN'S
TRUST**



**WHAT MATTERS TO
YOUNG MUMS?**

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between October 2016 and February 2017 Young Women's Trust (YWT) conducted research with mothers aged under 25 to find out what was important to them, and what they thought about work, children and employment support. In the last fifteen years the average age of mothers has gradually increased. There are now more births to mums over 35 than there are to mums under 25 and YWT have been concerned that motherhood brings different challenges to young mums than it does to older mums. Indeed, our findings paint a worrying picture of high numbers of young women struggling financially, socially, and emotionally, and experiencing discrimination. We found that:

Money is tight for young mums. 61% of mothers aged 16-24 said that they were only just managing financially. Nearly half (46%) regularly missed meals in order to provide for their children and a third admitted to being worried about the financial situation in their household, with 1 in 10 (11%) being extremely worried. Shockingly, a quarter (27%) of young mums currently used foodbanks or had used them in the past.

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Young mothers feel that they are **judged negatively because of their age**. They are criticised by members of public and feel alienated from mainstream mother and toddler groups. 74% had experienced doctors dismissing their concerns about their children's health and 79% had been patronised by nurses, midwives or health visitors.

At the same time, motherhood makes women more **isolated**. Over a quarter of young mothers (26%) left the house once a week or less.

Those mothers who work or who plan to **work** struggle with how to balance work and family. **Formal childcare** is expensive and inflexible, and 79% of mothers said that cheaper childcare available in their area would play an important role in allowing them to secure work. 82% of mothers of 3 and 4 year olds said that it would be important if the 15 hours free childcare was extended to be available all year round, rather than being restricted to 38 weeks of the year.



61%

OF MOTHERS AGED 16-24 SAID THAT THEY WERE ONLY JUST MANAGING FINANCIALLY

Young mothers often have poor experiences with **employers**. 25% had experienced discrimination when their employer found out they were pregnant and 39% had been illegally questioned in an interview about how being a mother affects their ability to work. The majority of young mothers said that it was important for more jobs to be advertised with flexible hours (83%) or part-time hours (81%).

Jobcentre Plus (JCP) has a poor reputation with young women, partly down to its habit of implementing policies rigidly and causing harm in the process. For example, in a situation where a mother was forced by her employer to leave her job for her own safety when pregnant, Jobcentre Plus sanctioned her rather than supporting her, forcing her to successfully appeal.

Recommendations

A. CHILDCARE

- The 15 hours free childcare should be available year-round rather than 38 weeks in a year to enable young women on low pay to reap the benefits of work.
- The funded 30 hours must be available for those who need it most, including those on zero hours contracts, apprentices and students. Otherwise, the new policy risks simply helping those who can already afford to work.
- YWT would like to see Care to Learn eligibility extended to 25 year olds so that young women can prepare for work gradually. Care to Learn funding is currently available for women with children who are 20 or under at the beginning of a publicly-funded course of study. Mothers under 25 – like other young people – are often starting out in their careers, but the cost of childcare prevents them from pursuing training while their children are young.
- Childcare providers need payment to reserve childcare in advance, and also use rigid booking

systems. YWT would like to see support for childcare providers, so that they can provide more flexible systems to book childcare for young mothers on low pay or who do not work a conventional 9-5 day for set days every week.

- YWT recommends that the government undertake research directly with younger parents about how childcare policy can meet their needs and enable them to work. Young mothers face distinct challenges to older mothers and these impact on their childcare choices. However, there is a lack of research by government which separates the views and experiences of older and younger parents.

B. ISOLATION

- YWT's research has highlighted the scale of isolation and loneliness faced by young mothers and its potential impact on their health and their children. We would like to see specific support from government for young mothers who are not working. This could take the form of one-to-one support or mentorship, to develop relationships outside their family units and ease their move back into education or employment.¹
- More generally, YWT would like to see greater recognition among government, service providers and researchers of the isolation experienced by young mothers. We would like this report to serve as a platform for further research about the best ways to counteract young mothers' isolation.

C. STIGMA

- YWT recommends that the NHS review its practice and training about bias or discrimination related to young motherhood.
- We further recommend that GP and hospital patient involvement groups make strategic efforts to include a quota of young mothers in meaningful consultation so young mothers' voices are heard in the health service.



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A QUARTER
OF YOUNG MOTHERS (26%)
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ONCE A WEEK
OR LESS**

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**HAD BEEN ILLEGALLY
QUESTIONED
IN AN INTERVIEW
ABOUT HOW BEING A MOTHER
AFFECTS THEIR ABILITY TO WORK**

D. EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT AND BENEFITS

- YWT recommends that the Department for Work and Pensions consults more extensively with young women when making policy – something we would be happy to help facilitate.
- The future design of JCP services should address the extremely-ingrained negative perception that young women have of the Jobcentre.
- As Universal Credit is rolled out, YWT are concerned that it has the same chance as Income Support or Job Seeker's Allowance of being implemented with counterproductive or harmful results for young women. YWT would like the Department for Work and Pensions to consider how best to prevent such an outcome.
- We recommend JCP consider adopting some of the principles that have worked for YWT's Work It Out employability service. These are: flexibility, remote provision, and support for young women as individuals with distinct aspirations and strengths.
- YWT would like Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, Job Seeker's Allowance, Universal Credit and Housing Benefit to be paid to under-25s at the same rates as they are to over-25s.

E. HOURS AND PAY

- YWT would like to see the National Living Wage extended so it applies to those under the age of 25.
- By default, YWT would like employers to offer all employment opportunities on a flexible, part-time or job share basis at the point of advertisement.

¹ Maguire and Mckay (2016) *Young, female and forgotten?* YWT.

2. FOREWORD — LAURA ASHLEY

I'm 25, I have two children and am part of the Bright Futures Young Mums group in South Shields. I came along to the focus group with Young Women's Trust as I was interested to meet and hear other young mums' thoughts and opinions and wanted to have a say. I think it's important for young mums' opinions and experiences to be heard as everybody matters.

We deserve to be heard. I am tired of people making assumptions about young mums.

When I had my first child I was only 21. To some this may seem very young. I remember feeling confused when I found out I was pregnant, it was a massive shock to me and I didn't know what to do. I got referred to speak about my options with a health professional but instead of giving me advice and support, he just made judgements. That really upset me. He told me that I should be more careful and that I was 'too young' to be having children. I walked out feeling patronised and judged.

I find childcare extremely expensive. I am trying to better myself by applying for higher education, and gaining experience through voluntary work. However this comes at a cost as I am having to pay for childcare whilst I study and rely on family members for childcare. The cost of childcare is so high I am unsure whether I can afford to go into higher education at all.

I felt isolated when I had my first child. It was all new to me and very scary. A lot of young mums are in the same situation, at the time you feel like you're the only one feeling like this, you lose the majority of your friends which doesn't help your emotional well-being. But after taking a step forward and reaching out to support groups and parent and toddler groups I realised I wasn't the only one.

It was much easier after having my second child but it doesn't stop you feeling isolated as although you already have a child it's still all new and you have to adapt to a new life all over again. I have found that going to a dedicated group for young mums has helped a lot. And I have even gained the confidence to potentially lead a group for young mums alongside the group that I attend myself. I hope this report will help people understand what life is really like for young mums like me.



3. INTRODUCTION

Balancing parenthood and paid work is a challenge for parents of any age. Childcare is expensive – even if the UK government does offer some hours for free – and constantly cited as a barrier to parents working.² There are fewer part-time jobs available than full-time, and they are often lower paid.³ The gender pay gap begins to widen at the age when women commonly become mothers, and is partly driven by the mothers missing out on opportunities for experience, progression and pay.⁴

Since the early 2000s, we have seen a seismic shift in the age of mothers. The teenage pregnancy rate has dropped and the numbers of older mothers has risen. For the first time, in 2014, there were more births to mothers aged 35 or older than there were to mothers aged under 25. The most recent statistics show that in 2015 there were 149,855 live births to mums over 35 compared to 132,059 to mums under 25.⁵

Like older mums, young mothers will often encounter challenges once they start a family. But this research project has confirmed that they have additional and different experiences that need addressing. The first is around **reputation**. YWT's report *The Real Story* found that 66% of the general public think that there are too many young women who get pregnant to secure accommodation or benefits.⁶ The public also

2 Select Committee on Affordable Childcare (2015) *Affordable Childcare*. House of Lords.

3 Timewise/Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2012), *Building a sustainable quality part-time recruitment market*.

4 Costa Dias, Elming & Joyce (2016) *The gender wage gap*. IFS Briefing Note BN186. Institute for Fiscal Studies.

5 Office for National Statistics, 'Births by parents' characteristics'. Dataset published 29 November 2016. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/datasets/birthsbyparentscharacteristics>

6 YWT (2013) *The Real Story*.

overestimate how many teenage pregnancies there are: the UK public think that an average of 15% of girls aged under 16 get pregnant every year, but this is 25 times higher than the actual figure of 0.6%.⁷

When it comes to education, employment or training, younger mothers will often have **different needs** to their older counterparts. Younger mothers are more likely than their older counterparts to be going back to work at a lower level or starting out anew. In most sectors, being on the lower rungs of a career ladder goes hand in hand with lower pay, and YWT are concerned that the exorbitant prices of childcare are far out of young mothers' reach.

⁷ Ipsos Mori (2013) Ipsos MORI Perils of Perception: Topline Results. Social Research Institute <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3188/Perceptions-are-not-reality-the-top-10-we-get-wrong.aspx>

In reviewing the existing research about young mothers, YWT found plenty of research investigating young mothers' household income or employment rates, or the effect of mothers' age on their children's educational outcomes. There has been less effort given to understanding young mothers' situations from **their perspective**, or to **developing policies** that have young mothers' concerns at heart. For that reason, with this research YWT have gone back to basics and asked "What matters to young mums?"

4. HOW WE WENT ABOUT THE RESEARCH

YWT researchers conducted six focus groups in England with a total of 35 young mothers between October and December 2016. In January and February 2017 we worked with Survation to carry out a representative survey of 319 mothers in the United Kingdom aged 16-24.



5. WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A YOUNG MOTHER?

There are a lot of assumptions made about young mothers, their motivations and the way they parent. We wanted to hear directly from them about their hopes, fears and what's it like to be a young mother. Young mothers told us that they worried a great deal about money and that giving their children a happy, secure future was important to them. They also felt 'judged' as young mothers by members of the public, health professionals and others, while finding that having children had made them more isolated and reduced the range of people they saw day-to-day.

Money

In all of the focus groups we ran, money was named as a worry. None of the mothers admitted to not managing at all (as you might expect in a group setting) but many described only just managing and were worried about it.

"Both of you working and just getting by. That's what we find frustrating. We're both working... We don't go on holiday. We don't even go out just me and him or all three of us together. He works seven days a week just to pay bills and have enough food in the fridge."

"Feeling comfortable. I never feel comfortable."

"Constantly thinking have I got enough for this, have I got enough for that. And especially with Christmas coming."

Mothers' incomes were under duress and only just covered necessities. This was supported by the findings of the poll we conducted with Survation.

- 61% of mothers aged 16-24 said that they were only just managing financially.
- Nearly half of them (46%) regularly missed meals in order to provide for their children and a third admitted to being worried about the financial situation in their household, with 1 in 10 (11%) being extremely worried.
- Shockingly, a quarter (27%) currently used foodbanks or had used them in the past.

"You have more going out than coming in."

"I got money but it takes long to come if that make sense... You have a list of all the stuff you have to do but you have to wait 'til the money comes."

"And another thing is that when you get paid there's so much you need to do with this money, get this, get that, that by the time you get all of that and you want to start thinking about how you look there's like £20 left."

Mothers reported that having children put added pressure on their finances. This was not just because the children's needs were expensive, but because they were conscientious and wanted to do the best for their children.

"If you don't have money then you can't provide... And you can't always provide on the social!"



"It's always there, it's more so when you've got someone who depends on you... There's always something they need... or want."

When asked about budgeting and saving, the young mothers agreed that they intended to save and plan with their money but that unexpected, necessary costs would dash their plans.

"I think when you save for things as well, then your washing machine might break and the money has to go on something else."

"There might be unexpected bills so you can't really plan."

"You know what happens, you're like I'm going to treat myself to this and then the oven breaks."

It followed that many women hoped to be more financially stable in the future. In particular, owning their own home was an aspiration, to have more independence and to have room for their families. However, achieving that hope felt "quite far off" because of problems saving the money. It might also involve sacrifices to find a home that they and their families could afford.

"Me and my partner are trying to buy a house cos I need a bigger house but it is about how we are going to get the money together... it's such a small flat and I've got a baby on the way. How are we supposed to live in this house?"

"Realistically to buy a house you're going to have to leave London. And that's scary as well. It's what you're used, you've got family and friends here."

"It's achievable, but not in the short term."

"I just feel like having more help provided [would make it more likely]. There's not much help out there. We're private renting so it's like dead money... We're never going to save money to buy us own home."

Children

The wellbeing of their child or children – now and in the future – was a prevalent theme in the hopes and worries that mothers talked about. This is not surprising considering all of the mothers had at least one child under school age and all of the groups took place in a setting with children present, in conversation with other mothers. Typical fears were for children's health or safety, and they hoped for the children to be happy, not to want for anything and to do well at nursery and school.

Conversations within the group about sending the children to nursery exposed concerns.

"Don't you think – are they being well looked after?" "Yeah, I do... You're giving your baby to a stranger."

"When people are like 'Oh my child's doing this, is yours?' And you're like 'No.' And then you start to get worried, don't you."

Often any future hopes the mothers had were bound up with the future of their families, and it was clear that having a child was an incentive for the mothers to work or learn.

Facilitator (asking about the hopes discussed in one group): "It seems like a lot of them are for your family. You've not put so much for you as an individual."

Mother: "I don't think you do as a mum, you can't."

Facilitator: "If you can get a good education what does that mean?"

Mother: "That you can help them [the children], really."

Feeling judged

A theme that was repeatedly raised in the focus group discussions was about the poor reputation that young mothers have and how the mothers felt they were judged negatively by others for having children at their age. Some named it as a specific worry:

"I'm always worried about what other people think"

"I always think, what are they thinking? It is daft."

In each group, women had anecdotes about members of the public criticising their parenting, asking personal questions or indicating disapproval in the street and on public transport. 73% of mothers we surveyed had felt they had experienced people being rude or unpleasant to them in public when they were out with their children because they were a young mother, with 43% experiencing this quite or very often.

"Some people say it to you, looks, sniggers or they huff."

"Especially the older generation they give you dirty looks on the street."

"What did I get? 'Are both your children from the same dad?' Yes they are thanks."

A number had experienced feeling excluded in mainstream parent and baby groups, having their views dismissed by doctors or being patronised by other health professionals



74% HAD EXPERIENCED DOCTORS DISMISSING THEIR CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN'S HEALTH

after they gave birth in hospital. This was echoed in our survey results, showing that young women felt assumptions were made about them because of their age.⁸

- 74% had experienced doctors dismissing their concerns about their children's health.
- 79% had been patronised by nurses, midwives or health visitors.
- 68% had felt unwelcome in a parent and toddler group.

These statistics demonstrate young women's perceptions of their situations and they are important. If health and parenting services want to do their best for patients and service users, then it is unacceptable for professionals in those services to alienate young women and leave a large section of young women feeling bad about their experiences with a service.

"I remember speaking to the doctor's or something and they spoke to me rubbish. And then I went with my mother or my mother in law and they spoke to me completely different. They just see me as a child... A child with a child, that's what they see you as."

"I feel like I'm not old enough to be a mum [at other mother/baby groups]... You don't know what you're doing and you're only a kid yourself!"

"I went to a play group and I was the youngest. It didn't feel right!"

We also found that 35% of young mothers often felt judged negatively by family and friends for going to work and 54% felt they were judged badly for claiming benefits. Regardless, many of the young mothers expressed a sense of achievement from having their

child and raising them. They explained that while pregnancy and motherhood had changed their priorities, their lives did not suffer from a large upheaval and there were lots of positive things about having their children young. They had the energy to run around after the children now, they felt closer to them than they would if having them older, and anticipated being able to pursue education, careers and live their life fully once their children were grown up.

"When I fell pregnant with my son they said I can't go back into education, my life is ruined forever. I'm like, not really because there will be childcare, there will be opportunities for me to go back to college and do things so people just try to put you down... Especially if they're young parents they try to make them feel like their life's over."

"It helped me become more confident. I don't want my boy to be shy like I was."

"I don't think it really changes your life. It just slows you down. That's what I believe."

"You get to enjoy life afterwards... You have the energy [now]."

"You can enjoy them."

"You understand your child better because the age gap is not huge."

Isolation

Becoming a mother also fundamentally changed the women's social landscape. Over half (59%) of those surveyed said their contact with their own parents increased, while 53% said their contact with friends had decreased, possibly reflecting the new demands that childcare put on their time. The young women also saw health services more frequently, with almost two-thirds (63%) saying their contact with GPs had increased and 55% saying they saw other healthcare professionals more often than they did previously. This increase is likely to be because of children's health requirements alongside their own personal needs.

Despite the demands on mothers' time, for some women motherhood meant isolation.

- 57% said they had become lonelier since becoming a mother, with 19% always feeling lonely.
- Over a quarter of young mothers (26%) left the house once a week or less.
- More than two-thirds (67%) said they had fewer friends since becoming a mother.

⁸ See similar findings in Wenham, A. (2011) *Mothers in the making: A qualitative longitudinal study exploring the journey of becoming and being a teenage mother*. PhD Thesis, University of York.

The nature of those friendships had also changed. 66% said they had developed different interests to their friends since having children and 68% agreed it was easier to be friends with people who also have children.

In summary, having a child represented a shift in young women's relationships with friends, family and the world around them. This change, accompanied by an increase in loneliness and isolation, presents a risk to mothers' mental health. Likewise, if mothers feel lonely, rarely spend time with others or leave their homes infrequently, we might expect this to affect their children's wellbeing.⁹

6. JOBS, CHILDREN AND SEEKING WORK

If you have children, any paid work needs to take their needs into account. We asked young mothers how they felt about work, childcare and the support available to find a job. On the whole, education and work was viewed positively but the women worried about balancing family life alongside employment. These concerns were compounded by the high cost of childcare, discrimination from employers and limited, appropriate support to find work.

Work

Most of the jobs that the mothers had done or were doing fell into the so-called "5 Cs" of women's work: caring, cashiering, catering, cleaning and clerical. Often the young women had worked in bars or serving food, in retail, or as carers or healthcare assistants. Other jobs ranged from personal training, to singing, to advertising.

The mothers had mixed experience of work, depending on the jobs they had done and their personal preferences, although the youngest mothers tended not to have worked or were still in education. For those who had worked it was widely agreed that it felt good to earn your own money rather than take benefits.

"When I worked it felt good when I got paid. Whereas I'm on income support at the moment and I don't feel good about it. I just want to earn it myself."

"You feel better earning your own money than you would just taking it."

"It's alright, in way it's kind of like giving me a break..."

"I just like to work with people, I can't be on my own!"

Some of the women with older children already had jobs on a part-time basis. Among those who did not work presently, getting a job and having a career was a future hope. Many of the women knew what they wanted to do and had begun to prepare for returning to or starting work. For instance, one mother had worked in a hair salon but had decided to change career to nursing and was doing healthcare courses. Others knew what sort of job they would have but did not need to take action yet. One mother had done bar and hotel work before, so thought she would do that again but had not prepared and thought she would get 'whatever job's available'.

"I don't mind the work, it's the hours that don't suit me."

The mothers anticipated difficulty in balancing work with childcare. This was partly a practical concern about the hours they would work, how to manage school holidays, and the cost of childcare. However it was also about the emotional conflict they felt between needing to work and missing out on time with their children and family.

"I'm dreading it. My hours... I work 5 in the morning til 2 in the afternoon or 5 in the evening til 12 at night. Family?... I never had a social life before so trying to do that with two children..."

"One of the things that I'd be worried about is if I was to get a job in school hours then the 6 weeks holidays I wouldn't know what to do."

"[I'm] scared of what you miss out on in your child's life."

"When you look into it you think I'm working to pay for my child's childcare so why would I miss out on their life and development?"

Childcare

Formal childcare was widely acknowledged to be expensive and inflexible, and a barrier to work. 26% of young mothers told us that they had left a job because they could not afford childcare.

"£315 for 9 days and she's hasn't been there for 2 of them because she's not been well. And you've still got to pay it. Have to pay in advance."

⁹ Mental Health Foundation (2010), *The Lonely Society?*

“For me to put him in childcare it costs £1,400 a month. That’s more than what I earn.”

“I got told that there’s no point me start working because what I would be earning won’t even cover the nursery fees.”

“[We] just want help with the childcare and then we’ll make our own money.”

Mostly when mothers needed childcare, they left their children with family – parents, in-laws, sisters, aunties, godmothers – without paying them. Yet, there was agreement that socialising with other children at nursery was important for children’s development, and that family was not an option all the time.

“My mother-in-law insists she has him once a week.”

“My mum works night shifts so I have to book her in advance.”

“It’s only like if I’ve needed to do something important like a course I leave him with my dad or his dad.”

“Some people don’t have family, they need to go to childcare.”

“It’s important for them to mix with other children. It brings them on.”

“My two never said a word until they went to the Sure Start.”

Childcare policy had a big part to play in helping young mothers find employment now or in the future.

- 79% of mothers said that cheaper childcare available in their area would play an important role in allowing them to secure work.
- 82% of mothers of 3 and 4 year olds said that it would be important for 15 hours free childcare to be extended to be available all year round, rather than for 38 weeks of the year.

Despite the 15 hours offer being universal for 3 and 4 year olds, only 60% of young mothers of 3 or 4 year olds told us that they currently used it, and this may be partly because it is available for 38 weeks rather than year-round. 21% had used it in the past but not now, while 19% have never used it and 1% did not know. In comparison, the take up of the 15 hours childcare among all families with 3 and 4 year olds is 65%, although it has previously been asserted to be as high as 95%.¹⁰

10 Department for Education (2017) *Parents’ views and demand for 30 hours free childcare*. Government Social Research; House of Lords Debate 16 June 2015 c1082.



Other research has suggested that young women who stay out of paid work to care for their children feel they have a duty to do so as a 'good mother'. In interviews, local policymakers and service providers have told YWT that they come up against family and community expectations of motherhood when trying to support young women to look for work. One Department for Work and Pensions Manager said:

"That is our constant battle. If you have a child under 5, then you are not expected to be economically active. The village does what the village does and it is the village that has to change."¹¹

This echoes other research with young mothers, where some mothers resisted policies to get them into education, employment or training because they wanted to prioritise parenting.¹² It also is in keeping with the experiences of over one third of young mothers who told us they have often felt as if friends and family have judged them negatively for going to work. Other researchers found that young mothers viewed putting their child in childcare as an abdication of responsibility for their young pregnancy, possibly in reaction to the stigma they felt as a young mother.¹³

Employers

Young mothers not only encountered problems with childcare services but also unhelpful attitudes and discriminatory or unlawful treatment from employers.

- 25% had experienced discrimination when their employer found out they were pregnant.
- 39% had been illegally questioned in an interview about how being a mother affects their ability to work.
- 26% had requests for flexible working related to their pregnancy or child turned down.

These findings are in keeping with the wealth of experiences documented by mothers of all ages by campaign group Pregnant then Screwed.¹⁴ They are also corroborated by recent research from the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the (then) Department for Business, Innovation and Skills that found young mothers to experience discrimination more frequently than older mothers.¹⁵

- Six times as many mothers under 25 (6%) reported that they were dismissed at some point after informing their employer of their pregnancy (1% average).

- 1 in 10 mothers under 25 (10%) reported they left their employers as a result of health and safety risks not being resolved (4% average).
- Twice as many mothers under 25 (15%) reported feeling under pressure to hand their notice in on becoming pregnant (7% average).

Countering discrimination among employers takes on yet more significance given that young mothers ranked employers' actions as equal to or more important than childcare issues in their search for work. The majority of young mothers said that it was important for more jobs to be advertised with flexible hours (83%) or part-time hours (81%). Mothers also recognised that employers' attitudes towards expectant mothers or those with young children played an important role in their search for work (80%).

Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus and the support it offered had a bad reputation with young mothers. Mentioning the job centre in focus groups elicited sighs and eye-rolls from the women.

"They're rude. It's like you owe them something."

"Really intimidating"

"They call it a job centre but it's just a benefits centre."

"I don't think they're that helpful to be honest."

"You hold your head down when you go in... so nobody sees me."

These feelings were in harmony with YWT's previous research with young women about Jobcentre Plus, from November 2016, which showed that:¹⁶

- 59% of young women said they found going to the job centre humiliating and 68% found it stressful.
- 35% of young women agreed that Jobcentre Plus had given them useful information about work and training opportunities but 44% disagreed.
- Only 19% of young women who had visited Jobcentre Plus in the last year agreed that it had helped them find work, while 58% disagreed.

The young mothers had a mixture of positive and negative stories to tell about their experiences at Jobcentre Plus. However, what emerged most strongly as a theme from the groups was how policies around various benefits or groups were implemented rigidly, sometimes with outcomes that were counterproductive or unjust. For instance, two mothers had both been on the same

11 Maguire, S. & McKay, E., (2016) *Young, female and forgotten?* Young Women's Trust.

12 Russell, L (2016) "Complex pathways for young mothers outside employment, education and training." *Ethnography and Education*, 11:1, 91-106, DOI: 10.1080/17457823.2015.1050683.

13 Ellis-Sloan (2012) *'Becoming' a Teenage Mother in the UK*. PhD Thesis, University of Brighton.

14 Pregnant then Screwed is a site for mothers to tell their stories of injustice anonymously. They also provide a free legal helpline. <http://pregnantthenscrewed.com/>

15 HM Government & EHRC (2016), *Pregnancy and Maternity-Related Discrimination and Disadvantage: Experiences of Mothers*.

16 Young Women's Trust (2016) *Work It Out: Effective employment support for young women*.

healthcare course through the job centre, at the same time, and had been offered jobs through the same scheme as NHS healthcare assistants. However, one was getting initial help with childcare because she was on Income Support, while the other on Job Seeker's Allowance was not, and was expected to continue to seek work after having found a job.

Mother 1: "They helped us [with childcare when on a healthcare course] but when I said I'd got the job, they said you've still got to look for work."

Mother 2: "So you're going to have to come in every week still?"

Mother 1: "But I didn't see the point... I'd only been with them four weeks and you've got people who've been there ages so I thought it was wrong. Her being only just 1 and having a job lined up."

Mother 2: (explaining to the rest of the group): "I'm on Income Support so they're not bothered about me. I just go home. Completely different to [Mother 1]. They paid 3 weeks nursery while I done the course and they'll pay 2 weeks of nursery when I start as I'll have no money until I get paid."

In another group, one of the mothers had been forced to leave her job when her employer refused to do a risk assessment for her pregnancy. Rather than getting more information from her and advising her on her rights, the job centre had sanctioned her, causing unnecessary stress for her and setting a chain of bureaucracy in motion.

"They say if you quit then they're going to sanction you for like six weeks or something. So then you go and sign on but because you've quit you've intentionally made yourself jobless to them. Their point is that you stay in the job until you find another one. They sanctioned me but then I done like an appeal, wrote down I was unsafe doing the work I was doing so I had to for the safety of me and my baby... But that was stressful going through that process."

In another group, we found that pregnant women or mothers under 18 had to travel 15 miles to the nearest city to see the specialist Jobcentre Plus advisers for their age group, entailing significant time and expense. And in another group, a young mother on Income Support had regular appointments with the job centre, and sometimes had to take time off work to go to them.

"You have to go to talk for no reason. Even though I work part-time... It's just annoying. I'm not saying people should just go get benefits but if I've got a child what more do you need to know about me? ... Why do I need to visit every six weeks?"



7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Mothers aged under 25 are clearly committed to their children's upbringing but all too frequently encounter stigma, feel isolated and struggle for money. The route to earning that money through work is strewn with other obstacles: difficulties in accessing or paying for childcare, choosing to miss out on time with family, employers' treatment of young mothers and inconsistent support from Jobcentre Plus.

A. CHILDCARE

The cost and availability of good quality childcare continues to pose problems for young women who want to work. The 30 hours free childcare policy when implemented may go some way in encouraging young women to work, but it needs to fulfil certain criteria to help those on low pay or with variable hours:

- The 15 hours free childcare should be available year-round rather than 38 weeks in a year to enable young women on low pay to reap the benefits of work.
- The funded 30 hours must be available for those who need it most, including those on zero hours contracts, apprentices and students. Otherwise, the new policy risks simply helping those who can already afford to work.
- YWT would like to see Care to Learn eligibility extended to 25 year olds so that young women can prepare for work gradually. Care to Learn funding is currently available for women with children who are 20 at the beginning of a publicly-funded course of study. Mothers under 25 – like other young people – are often starting out in their careers, but the cost of childcare prevents them from pursuing training while their children are young.
- Childcare providers need payment to reserve childcare in advance, and also use rigid booking systems. YWT would like to see support for childcare providers, so that they can provide more flexible systems to book childcare for young mothers on low pay or who do not work a conventional 9-5 day for set days every week.
- We recommend that the government do research directly with younger parents about how childcare policy can meet their needs and enable them to work. Young mothers face distinct challenges to older mothers and these impact on their childcare choices. However, there is no existing research by government which separates the views and experiences of older and younger parents.

B. ISOLATION

Our research has exposed the enormous degree of isolation and loneliness that young mothers face. Motherhood reduces young women's interactions with the world beyond their homes and narrows their support networks. This is exacerbated by the considerable shift in the average age of motherhood, meaning that young mothers are now a minority and alienated from mainstream social support for mothers, such as parent and toddler groups. In turn, limited social connections may slow or prevent their transition back into the world of work and affect the health and wellbeing of both mothers and children.

- We would like to see specific support from government for young mothers who are not working. This could take the form of one-to-one support or mentorship, to develop relationships outside their family units and ease their move back into education or employment.¹⁷
- More generally, YWT would like to see greater recognition among government, service providers and researchers of the isolation experienced by young mothers. We would like this report to serve as a platform for further research about the best ways to counteract young mothers' isolation.

C. STIGMA

Young mothers report feeling stigmatised and 'judged' for their age. GPs, health visitors, midwives and other health workers were highlighted as key offenders, which is worrying considering that motherhood increases young women's contact with such professionals. Interactions with health services should not be upsetting experiences with potential to alienate young mothers from sources of support and information.

- YWT recommends the NHS review its practice and training about bias or discrimination related to young motherhood.
- We further recommend that GP and hospital patient involvement groups make strategic efforts to include a quota of young mothers in meaningful consultation so young mothers' voices are heard in the health service.

D. EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT AND BENEFITS

This report demonstrates once again that Jobcentre Plus has a poor reputation with young women, which is concerning if it is their main source of support when seeking work. Young women's disdain for Jobcentre Plus was fuelled by their experience – or their friends' experiences – of JCP's rigid application of benefit conditions, which to them seemed irrational and could cause real stress and hardship.

¹⁷ Maguire and Mckay (2016) *Young, female and forgotten?* YWT.

- YWT recommends that the Department for Work and Pensions consults more extensively with young women and listens to their views – something we would be happy to help facilitate.
- We also suggest that future design of JCP services addresses the extremely ingrained negative perception that young women have of the Jobcentre.
- As Universal Credit is rolled out, YWT are concerned that it has the same chance as Income Support or Job Seeker's Allowance of being implemented with counterproductive or harmful results for young women. YWT would like the Department for Work and Pensions to consider how best to prevent such an outcome.
- The Work It Out service run by YWT offers young women solution-focused coaching and personalised feedback on their CVs and job applications, over the telephone, email, text messaging and WhatsApp. We recommend JCP consider adopting some of its principles where possible: flexibility, remote provision, and support for young women as individuals with distinct aspirations and strengths.
- Under-25s on benefits are paid less than those aged 25 or over, regardless of the financial demands on mothers under 25. YWT would like Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance, Job Seeker's Allowance, Universal Credit and Housing Benefit to be paid to under-25s at the same rates as they are to over-25s.

E. HOURS AND PAY

This research has highlighted how money is a core worry for young mothers, who admit they are only 'just about managing'. All of the mothers we spoke to were aged under 25 and as such were not entitled to the National Living Wage. At the time of the fieldwork this was £7.20 per hour and the women were only entitled to as low a wage as £4.00 per hour if they were under 18.¹⁸ The significant pressures on young mother's finances demonstrate that age is no indicator of need and that low pay may be a deterrent to working. Furthermore, young women who are mothers will find it easier and more affordable to work if they can take flexible or part-time hours.

- YWT would like to see the National Living Wage extended so it applies to those under the age of 25.
- By default, YWT would like employers to offer all employment opportunities on a flexible, part-time or job share basis at the point of advertisement.

¹⁸ "National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage rates" <https://www.gov.uk/national-minimum-wage-rates>. Accessed 3 March 2017.

THANK YOU!

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METHODOLOGY

YWT carried out a literature review about young mothers at the beginning of 2016, covering publications from the previous five years on matters to do with social policy. The review divided literature into groups: the impact of young mothering on woman and child; stigma associated with being a young mother; and working and studying in relation to mothering and childcare. Since research was often several years old, and focused on specific interventions or teenage parents, the decision was made to conduct 4-6 exploratory focus groups with young mothers aged under 25.

We conducted 6 focus groups over October – December 2016 with a total of 35 young women. Groups were held in: Yorkshire, Manchester, Newcastle, South London, East London and Leicester. Each lasted 1-1.5 hours. YWT worked with other organisations to arrange the focus groups, including children's centres, young mothers' support groups or charities, and a mother and baby unit.

We asked the mothers about:

- What they liked and disliked about being a parent
- Their worries and hopes
- Work
- Childcare
- Jobcentre Plus
- Their particular experience of being a young parent

YWT then commissioned Survation to poll young mothers about finances, employment, social networks, stigma, childcare and employment support. The survey was conducted in February 2017 with a representative sample of 319 mothers aged 16-24.





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