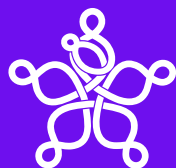


Creating connections: the importance of peer support

Policy makers



Maternal Mental
Health Alliance



At least one in five women experience a mental health problem during pregnancy and after birth, and 70% will hide or underplay maternal mental health difficulties. With suicide remaining the leading cause of maternal death in the first year after birth and an understanding that mental health problems not only affect the health of mothers but can also have longstanding effects on children's emotional, social and cognitive development, understanding the role of Peer Support is more important and urgent than ever.

There are multiple ways to provide support for mums but this resource focuses on the role of Peer Support, key barriers to access for young mums and suggestions to help policy makers to better understand how Peer Support can be effectively commissioned.

Our other resource “Understanding the needs of young mums” brings together key statistics, themes, examples and suggestions to help commissioners better understand the needs of young mums and birthing people specifically and can be read in conjunction with this resource or as a standalone document.

A note on language: This resource uses the term ‘mothers’ and ‘mums’, but we recognise that perinatal mental health issues affect women, gender diverse individuals and people whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. It is vital that care systems take an inclusive approach to provide support to all birthing people for their mental health and wellbeing.



Peer support can be described as...

“There are different types of peer support, but they all involve both giving and receiving support. This could be sharing knowledge or providing emotional support, social interaction or practical help. Everyone’s experiences are treated as equally important, and no one is more of an expert than anyone else. How much help you give and receive will depend on what feels right for you at different times.”

Peer support | Mental Health Foundation

“Peer support is a **supported self-management intervention**. It happens when people with similar long-term conditions, or health experiences, come together to support each other – either on a one-to-one or group basis.”

NHS England » Supported self-management: peer support guide

“A non-professional form of support provided by someone who has similar experiences in common with the person seeking support. In general, peer support is thought to offer the opportunity for a more authentic empathy between the person and their peer than between them and healthcare professionals who may not have the same lived experiences.”

NG201 Evidence review D

“Where people with similar experiences can connect and support each other.”

Peer support groups – Mind

“Peer support refers to a process through which people who share common experiences or face similar challenges come together as equals to give and receive help based on the knowledge that comes through shared experience (Riessman, 1989).

“A ‘peer’ is an equal, someone with whom one shares demographic or social similarities. ‘Support’ expresses the kind of deeply felt empathy, encouragement, and assistance that people with shared experiences can offer one another within a reciprocal relationship.”

DPenney_Defining_peer_support_2018_Final.pdf



Recognition of the importance of Peer Support is growing

The NHS Five Year Forward View for Mental Health highlights the importance of peer support in the broader strategy for improving mental health services in the UK. [The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health](#).

Many organisations such as Homestart, Mental Health Foundation, Mind, National Childbirth Trust, PANDAS, Rethink Mental Illness, the NHS and other VCSE organisations also offer Peer Support services, advice and guidance.

“Research shows that peer support can improve people’s well-being, meaning they have fewer hospital stays, larger support networks, and better self-esteem, confidence and social skills.”

[Peer support | Mental Health Foundation](#)

“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... 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.”

* [What-matters-to-young-mums-report.pdf](#)

Peer Support enhances vital protective factors for young mums by:

Provide a means of overcoming shame and stigma

Increasing access to resources; learning, sharing and applying effective coping strategies

Provide emotional support; help to develop a sense of hope and optimism

Increasing self-efficacy; gaining confidence in seeking support and help

Increasing social connection; reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness



“Young mothers wanted to share experiences with and talk to other young people in the same situation. They felt they were **more likely to trust other mothers their age** due to commonalities between them.”

[NG201 Evidence review D](#)

“Peer support has been shown to enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy for mothers across a range of studies.”

[*Peer Support in Perinatal Mental Health: Review of Evidence and Provision in Scotland \(Internship Project Report\)](#)

“There are indications that peer support may be especially helpful to women who feel stigmatised, are socially isolated or in high-stress circumstances.”

[*Peer Support in Perinatal Mental Health: Review of Evidence and Provision in Scotland \(Internship Project Report\)](#)

“The message coming across clearly was that informal peer support for mums could play a preventative role, providing a safe place where mums could talk to others about their emotional issues and anxieties.”

[Mums_Peer_Support_Research.pdf](#)

“A programme such as YPC (Young Parents Connect) that enables a focus on parental well-being and mental health, as well as a space for building connection and a sense of belonging is well placed to achieve positive outcomes related to parental mental health and well-being which then extends across broad domains of everyday life.”

[Young Parents Connect Evaluation 2024: Associate Development Solutions and Mental Health Foundation](#)

“Where young mums had received specific support from a dedicated service for young mums, they said they felt understood and supported, and that opportunities were provided for them to connect with young people in a similar situation.”

[Final_-_the_maternal_mental_health_experiences_of_young_mums.pdf](#)

“Lack of social support is a major risk factor for perinatal mental health problems, and several studies report that women link the onset of their poor perinatal mental health with the loss of social support.”

[*Peer Support in Perinatal Mental Health: Review of Evidence and Provision in Scotland \(Internship Project Report\)](#)



Barriers and challenges commonly faced by young mums, when considering Peer Support include:

- Feelings of stigma, shame and judgement; from professionals and older parents
- Lack of trust of professionals
- Physical, including lack of transport, rural isolation
- Socioeconomic, including cost of transport, childcare, internet etc.

“Young mums we spoke to told us how they often felt judged by the services they come into contact with for being a young parent and felt that concerns about their health and their child’s health were not taken seriously as a result.”

[Final_-_the_maternal_mental_health_experiences_of_young_mums.pdf](#)

“I feel judgement about being a young parent. Being out and about I always felt judged being a young mum. An appointment with your child, feel they’re looking down on you. But when you come to this group, we are all the same age, all going through the same thing. I’m not by myself, I’m not the only one that’s judged.”

[Young Parents Connect Evaluation 2024: Associate Development Solutions and Mental Health Foundation](#)

“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.”

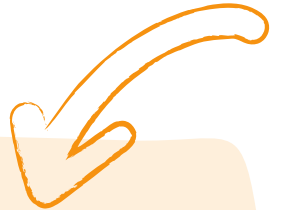
[*What-matters-to-young-mums-report.pdf](#)

Evidence indicates that focusing on these key considerations in relation to Peer Support will help to overcome the barriers and maximise the benefits highlighted above:

- Safe, warm, welcoming and non-judgemental space
- Co-production and opportunities for meaningful involvement of those with lived experience
- Benefits everyone including peer supporters
- Practicalities such as accessibility and inclusivity
- Complements not replicates existing clinical services
- Tailored to young mums (when implementing for this group)
- Evaluation: measuring impact and evidence of what works

In addition

- Maternal Mental Health Alliance, MIND and McPin published “*Five Principles of Perinatal Mental Health Support*” in 2019 which gives more detailed guidance in relation to some of these considerations and can be read in conjunction with this resource. [mind-mcpin-perinatal-peer-support-principles-full-mmha-web.pdf](#). [Perinatal Peer Support – Mind](#)
- Mental Health Foundation have developed a toolkit “*Small Talk*” which provides eight principles and six essential ingredients for you to consider when developing Peer Support. While the focus is on lone parents, the principles and essential ingredients are relevant to Peer Support groups for mums more generally. [Course: SmallTalk | Digital Bricks Learning Portal](#)
- Families 1st UK have developed a guide for setting up a Peer Support group and includes six stages each with their own guide. [Parents 1st – The home for good quality peer support](#)



Suggestions for policy makers

There are clear economic benefits for investing in the prevention of mental health. In the 2022 report “*The economic case for investing in the prevention of mental health conditions in the UK*” published by Mental Health Foundation, London School of Economics and Care Policy and Evaluation Centre, they estimate mental health problems cost the UK economy at least £117.9 billion, £100.8 billion in England alone.

[MHF-Investing-in-Prevention-Full-Report.pdf](#)

The report also estimates the lifetime costs from a societal perspective of perinatal depression and perinatal anxiety alone, to both mother and child, have been estimated to be £75,728 and £34,811 respectively.

It is vital that support for mums is provided as early as possible and Peer Support plays an important role in this. Below are some suggestions to help policy makers when considering the role of Peer Support.

Consideration of Peer Support should be included in national and local strategies for health, social care and community development.

“Peer support should not be seen as a low-cost substitute for professional support when it is needed, but as a worthwhile complementary and skilled intervention that can benefit mothers in complex ways, including recovery from perinatal mental health symptoms for some, and subjectively meaningful improvements in wellbeing for others.”

[Community-based perinatal mental health peer support: a realist review 2023; Jenny McLeish, Susan Ayers and Christine McCourt *12884_2023_Article_5843.pdf](#)

As part of this consider bespoke or tailored Peer Support for young mums.

We know that stigma attached to young mums can be a barrier to accessing wider Peer Support groups.

In the 2023 publication [final_-_the_maternal_mental_health_experiences_of_young_mums.pdf](#) they conclude: “We heard that the most positive experiences of support were from dedicated services in a local area that catered to their needs as young mums. It is crucial to recognise the important work that these services do and ensure they are embedded within local systems of support.”

Listen to the voices of mums when commissioning Peer Support.

In 2024 the Government Policy Lab launched “*The Lived Experience in Policymaking Guide: Reflections on the principles, behaviours, and mindsets that underpin lived experience work*” which aims to make explicit some of the underlying principles policymakers might consider in order to carry out effective and empathetic lived experience work. We suggest that you use this guide to support you when involving mums in your policy making process.

[PL_Livedexperienceguide_v6-1.pdf](#)



Policy design should take into account longer-term funding to support mums and this should include Peer Support provision.

“Health and local authority commissioners should commission support pathways and holistic services to meet the individual needs of all girls and women with an agility to provide support for those with specific vulnerabilities, including young mums.” [final_-_the_maternal_mental_health_experiences_of_young_mums.pdf](#).

It is essential to ensure joined-up full funding for all women and families across the UK to have equitable access to comprehensive, high-quality perinatal mental health care, including Peer Support. The investment is relatively small, but the benefits can be huge and avoid long-lasting, damaging impact.

“Perinatal depression, anxiety and psychosis carry a total long-term cost to society of about £8.1 billion for each one-year cohort of births in the UK. We hope that this shocking statistic will motivate policy makers, commissioners and providers to act urgently. It is in their power to do something about this issue: if perinatal mental health problems were identified and treated quickly and effectively, many of these serious and long term human and economic costs could be avoided.” [costsofperinatal.pdf](#)

The public health grant has seen a £1bn real-terms cut since 2015. This cut needs to be reversed in order for local government to be able to provide the programmes that are necessary and this should include the provision of Peer Support. In addition the 2025 report [Investing in the public health grant – The Health Foundation states:](#)

“Public health grant allocations have been made just before the start of the financial year for the past 4 years. Additional funding has come in the form of relatively small time-limited pots. On top of the large real-terms reductions in the grant, the lack of certainty this creates can make it difficult for local authorities to effectively plan and implement services for the longer term.”

Ensure data and evidence of the effectiveness of Peer Support is being captured.

It is vital to gather more information relating to both the economic benefits and individual benefits of Peer Support.

Ask for input from commissioners before making a new policy.

This may help to make sure when funding is available it goes to the right places, including the delivery of Peer Support.

Summary



Supporting the mental health of mums is vitally important both for them as individuals, their children and wider families but also for society.



Peer Support can play an important role in this but needs to be commissioned sustainably, developed with those who will benefit and delivered as part of a much wider package of support and systems change. We have offered suggestions to help with policy making in this area.

Useful links

- [Amplifying Maternal Voices toolkit](#)
- [Mental Health Foundation – Young Mums Connect](#)
- [Mental health peer support | Support and services | Mind – Mind](#)
- [NHS England » Examples of survey tools for use in supported self-management](#)
- [NHS England » Supported self-management: peer support guide](#)
- [Parents 1st – The home for good quality peer support](#)
- [Small Talk – Overview](#)
- [The Perinatal Peer Support Principles](#)



Related research

A framework for supporting teenage mothers and young fathers: Local Government Association and Public Health England (2019) [‘Your parents’ support framework](#).

Antenatal Care Peer Support: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2021) [‘NG201 Evidence review D](#).

Community-based perinatal mental health peer support: a realist review: Jenny McLeish, Susan Ayers and Christine McCourt (2023) [‘12884_2023_Article_5843.pdf](#).

Defining “Peer Support”: Implications for Policy, Practice and Research: Darby Penney (2018) [DPenney_Defining_peer_support_2018_Final.pdf](#).

Investing in the public health grant: The Health Foundation (2025) [Investing in the public health grant – The Health Foundation](#).

Outside the Box Mums’ Peer Support Research: Outside the box and CORRA foundation (2022) [Mums_Peer_Support_Research.pdf](#).

Peer Support in Perinatal Mental Health: Review of Evidence and Provision in Scotland: APS Group for Scottish Government (2020) [‘Peer Support in Perinatal Mental Health: Review of Evidence and Provision in Scotland \(Internship Project Report\)](#).

Supported self-management: peer support guide: NHS England (2023) [NHS England » Supported self-management: peer support guide](#).

The costs of perinatal mental health problems: Centre for Mental Health, LSE and Personal Social

Services Research Unit (2014) [costsofperinatal.pdf](#).

The five year forward view for mental health: Independent Mental Health Taskforce to the NHS in England (2016) [The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health](#).

The Lived Experience in Policymaking Guide: Reflections on the principles, behaviours, and mindsets that underpin lived experience work: Government Policy Lab (2024) [PL_Livedexperienceguide_v6-1.pdf](#).

The maternal mental health experience of young mums: Children & Young People’s Mental Health Coalition and Maternal Mental Health Alliance (2023) [Final_-_the_maternal_mental_health_experiences_of_young_mums.pdf](#).

Transport and maternal mental health report: Mental Health Foundation (2023) [Transport and maternal mental health report – Mental Health Foundation.pdf](#).

Trauma-informed practice: our policy perspective: Mental Health Foundation [Trauma-informed practice: our policy perspective | Mental Health Foundation](#).

What matters to young mums?: Young Women’s Trust [‘What-matters-to-young-mums-report.pdf](#).

Working definition of trauma-informed practice: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) [Working definition of trauma-informed practice – GOV.UK](#).

Young Mums Together; Promoting young mothers’ wellbeing: Mental Health Foundation [MHF-young-mums-together-pilot-report.pdf](#).

Further information

If you need support visit:

[Mental health support for mums and families](#)

For more information, visit the

[Creating Connections project page](#) or email
Creating.connections@mentalhealth.org.uk.



**Maternal Mental
Health Alliance**

International House
12 Constance Street
London E16 2DQ

info@maternalmentalhealthalliance.org
www.maternalmentalhealthalliance.org
[@MMHAlliance](https://www.instagram.com/MMHAlliance)

Registered in England and Wales No. 1178152.



Studio 2
197 Long Lane
London SE1 4PD

info@mentalhealth.org.uk
www.mentalhealth.org.uk
[@MentalHealthFN](https://www.instagram.com/MentalHealthFN)

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