

Creating connections: the importance of peer support

Commissioners



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 commissioners 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.”

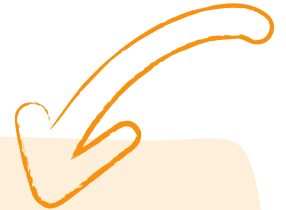
[*What-matters-to-young-mums-report.pdf](#)

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 commissioners

Commissioners have a vital role to play in ensuring that services in a local area support the needs of mums and this includes consideration of Peer Support. Below are some suggestions:

Incorporate Peer Support in Service Design.

Embed Peer Support models into commissioned services and treat them as complementary to clinical services.

“Good peer support builds on what makes it unique and distinct from clinical mental health services. It offers holistic support that goes beyond mental health. It works flexibly to adapt to the needs of the mum and her family. The work of peer support and clinical mental health services should complement each other. As the outcomes of peer support and clinical mental health services overlap only partially, women need to have access to both forms of support.”

[mind-mcpin-perinatal-peer-support-principles-full-mmha-web.pdf](#)

This can be achieved in many ways, including commissioning Peer Support workers within NHS Trusts and commissioning third sector organisations on a sustainable basis.

Listen to the voices of mums when commissioning Peer Support.

Involve mums in the co-production of any Peer Support you commission.

“Co-production with experts-by-experience should also be a standard approach to commissioning and service design.”

[The Five Year forward view for Mental Health](#)

Build evaluation of impact into commissioning process.

Ensure outcomes of Peer Support initiatives are evaluated, adding to vital evidence of what works. NHS England have provided examples of survey tools that could be used to evaluate Peer Support which you might find useful.

[NHS England » Examples of survey tools for use in supported self-management](#)

Look for evidence of effective models of what is already working and how to implement more widely. There are many models of Peer Support and NHS England have produced guidance to help to understand the different models that exist. You may find it useful to review this.

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

“There is no one ‘right’ or ‘best’ model of peer support. Models vary depending on the circumstances, skills and needs of the people involved and the resources available. Involving people in the development and delivery of peer support is the best way to ensure that the model is right for those who will access it.”

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



Fund training, development and on-going support for Peer Support workers as they are vital to ensuring a safe and non-judgemental space. The nature of the work also means that it can be incredibly challenging so think about how services can be commissioned to ensure staff are supported in their role as Peer Support workers.

The “*Five Principles of Perinatal Peer Support*” Maternal Mental Health Alliance, MIND and McPin suggest a set of skills including the ability to establish and maintain ground rules and boundaries, adhere to safeguarding policies as well as demonstrating warmth, care and positive non-stigmatising language.

[mind-mcpin-perinatal-peer-support-principles-full-mmha-web.pdf](#)

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 by Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition and Maternal Mental Health Alliance “The maternal mental health experiences of young mums” 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.”

Recognise and value the crucial role played by the voluntary and community sector in supporting mums.



These offer great examples of delivering Peer Support but often lack the sustainable funding they need. Are there existing organisations with experienced and expertise who could be commissioned to deliver services where you are?

The report “*The Five Year forward view for Mental Health*” published in 2016 and written by the independent Mental Health Taskforce to the NHS in England states that “All new models must be developed in partnership with experts-by-experience, carers, and community and voluntary organisations. Psychological and social interventions, such as peer support and short-stay alternatives to hospital, are particularly valued by people with mental health problems. [The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health](#)

Find local VCSE perinatal mental services using the [Hearts & Minds Map](#) | [Find 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 commissioners 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.



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