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# New mums mental health support at Falls Women's Centre

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THE North's maternal mental health provision urgently needs to be overhauled to improve the lives of mothers and their babies, according to a peer maternal support group.

This week women from the Maternal Advocacy Support (Mas) Project told MLAs and health leaders of their first-hand experiences of the health care system.

The Mas Project, supported by The National Lottery Community Fund, provides peer support to women who are pregnant or have children up to the age of three. It offers a platform for women to talk about their experiences in the health care system and advise on service areas that could be improved or developed for pregnant and postnatal women experiencing mental health issues in the North of Ireland.

The group is calling for improvements in provision in a number of key areas including: continuity of care, better resources in primary care, breastfeeding support and the creation of a Mother and Baby Unit in the North.

Deirbhile Liggett, who participated in the Mas Project at Falls Women's Centre, said that attending the group every week had a positive impact on her mental health.

"Meeting and talking to other mums was just what I needed after being so isolated during lockdown. The Mas Project has not only given me a sense of purpose, but it has also given me a role in which I can make a change in society. There needs to be improved maternal mental health services in Northern Ireland. Knowing that I am contributing to this change makes me so proud," she said.

Clare Anderson, Mas Project Co-ordinator, said: "It's

essential that women are listened to by our politicians and those leading the health service. By understanding women's lived experiences, there is the potential to improve services. Early intervention is very important and providing support at an early stage can make a big difference.

"Continuity of care is essential. Seeing the same medical staff develops trust and allows women to speak more openly about how they're feeling. Some women felt that opportunities for early identification of perinatal mental health problems and support were missed because they saw someone new on each visit."

In addition, the North has the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world.

"Many women said that they did not feel supported to breast feed and felt that they stopped breast-feeding before they were ready to," Clare



IMPROVEMENTS: Women from the Falls Women's Centre participated in the project which supports women who are pregnant or have children up to three years old.

added. The Mas Project, which has just completed its first year, was set up by the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) to support women at grassroots level within the community in partnership with eight women's centres in Belfast, Derry and Lisburn.

Participants have benefited from a range of sessions designed to support their mental health and promote emotional wellbeing.

Anne McVicker, Director of the WRDA, said: "Lived experience is at the heart of the Mas project, empowering women to lead the project and service, shaped by their own

experiences. Our next stage will allow participants to train as group leaders and facilitate their own sessions."

The project is supported by Aware NI, which provides Mental Health First Aid and peer support training for project staff and participants. It is funded by the Big Lottery Community Fund.