

# ‘Perinatal mental health care in Northern Ireland must be improved’

*The Mas Project wants to see better health service provision for pregnant women and mothers. JOANNE SAVAGE reports*

## FEATURE

**N**orthern Ireland’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.

The Maternity Advocacy Support or (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 advice on service areas that could be improved or developed for pregnant and postnatal women experiencing mental health issues in Northern Ireland.

The group is calling for improvements in provision in a number of key areas including: continuity of care, better resources in primary care, breast-feeding support and the creation of a specialist mother and baby perinatal mental health unit, because Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK without one, meaning that for those who cannot access the limited perinatal mental health services that are available here, mothers presenting with such problems are often hospitalised in psychiatric units separately from their babies, which leads to an increase in stress, anxiety and vital mother and baby bonding.

With the partnership of the Women’s Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) the project runs support groups at eight loca-

tions across the province, including six in Belfast and Lisburn and two in Londonderry. The groups can be found at Windsor, Falls Road, Footprints, Atlas, Ballybeen, Greenway, Women’s Centre Derry and Strathfoyle Women’s Centre.

Such groups provide women with advice on well-being, mindfulness and self-care as well as providing a sense of community and a non-judgemental space in which pregnant women and mothers who are struggling with mental health problems can share their thoughts and feelings and feel therefore less isolated.

These groups also embolden women to become involved in advocacy and campaigning work that will help improve the lot of pregnant women and mothers who battle perinatal mental health problems.



Clare Anderson, Mas Project coordinator, said: “We aim to provide peer support for pregnant women and mothers of those with children up to the age of three who have experienced mental health difficulties.

“We also advocate strongly for better health service provision for pregnant women and mothers.

“What we are trying to highlight is that because of the lack of a specialist perinatal mental health mother and baby unit in Northern Ireland, the limited services that are available for perinatal mental health are currently only available according to a strict criteria so that the majority of women suffering from such issues still receive support from primary care.

“This means that women with perinatal mental health issues, when they are hospitalised, are sadly separated from their babies and would have to go into a general psychiatric unit. This has a massively negative impact particularly on the vitally important bonding process between a mother and child and therefore leads to an increase in stress and anxiety.

“Other issues that we want to highlight is the importance of continuity of care wherein women get to see the same medical staff throughout a pregnancy and in the immediate time afterwards because this allows for the development of trust and emboldens women to speak more openly about how they are feeling.”

Clare added: “Some women have told us they feel that opportunities for early identification of perinatal mental health problems

and support were missed because they were seeing different medical staff on each visit, which means they are having to constantly repeat their problems to someone different and this does not allow for the best level of understanding between health practitioners and pregnant women and mothers who are struggling in this way.

“Continuity of care especially in midwifery is available in the rest of the UK, and it will be implemented here, but in the interim many women struggle because of a lack of this, and also we want to see continuity of care beyond midwifery which would involve seeing the same GP, health visitor and consultant throughout a pregnancy.

“Other issues we campaign on involve helping women to feel free to breast-feed, because Northern Ireland has one of the lowest breast-feeding rates in the UK, often because women do not feel comfortable doing this in public spaces. Many stop before they feel they are ready and this has a real impact on them. They feel support and encouragement isn’t provided in this area.

“The Mas Project would also like to see better funding for counselling services for pregnant women and mothers who are struggling, because at the moment waiting lists are extremely long.”

Clare states that an estimated one in five women struggle with perinatal mental health issues, but the number could be much higher because there is always so much stigma around mental health and often women do not feel free to speak out about their problems.

“It can be difficult for

women to fully disclose how they are feeling during and after pregnancy,” she added.

Gillian McCarroll is a health coordinator and Mas Project worker at Ballybeen Women’s Centre. She said: “We run a group here on a weekly basis and it’s very much a needs-led project where we put together a programme of activities and support for pregnant women

and mothers who are struggling in order to improve their mental health and well-being.

“We have different information sessions, including one where we worked with a perinatal psychologist. We have also had representatives from mental health charity AWARE NI, to discuss perinatal mental health. We do work around personal development and work around mental health awareness, and we try to promote confidence and self-esteem among attendees. Women have the opportunity to work together and realise that they are not alone. Having that sense of community and support from each other is something that is very important to the women attending. It’s also an opportunity for pregnant women and mothers to develop friendships and that helps because they know their problems need not be a source of shame because they are common to others.

“There is a taboo around mental health in general and these Mas groups help because women start to realise that there are others who feel the same and that their mood and state of mind can be improved just by becoming part of a community of women who understand what they are going through.



“Throughout lockdown we held these groups via Zoom and for many women that was the only source of contact they had outside the home, so it was a lifeline to those who were feeling isolated during that time. Now we can meet in the centres again and attending these groups means a lot from the women who avail of them according to the feedback they give us.”

Deirbhile Liggett, who participated in the Mas Project at Falls Women’s Centre, said that attending the group every week had 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. **Visit [wrda.net/perinatal-mental-health-and-the-mas-project/](http://wrda.net/perinatal-mental-health-and-the-mas-project/).**





Members of a support group run by the Mas Project at Windsor Women's

Centre in Belfast. The groups assist pregnant women and mothers who may be struggling with mental ill health







**Clare Anderson, Mas Project co-ordinator**

