



The Impact of
The Mas Project
Women's Experiences



This book creates a collection of experiences told by women across the Mas project. In the pages that follow you will read experiences of pain, loss, abuse, bereavement, adversity and trauma. You will also hear the resilience and strength of the women who share their words with us. The Mas project has provided a safe space to come together and share experiences. The women have bravely shared their stories to provide an insight into their own journey and the support that has been provided to them through the Mas project.

Connecting with others decreases isolation, builds strength and togetherness in hearing both individual and collective experiences. The Mas project provides a platform for women to share their story with the aim of improving future services.

Sincere thanks to all the amazing women who have been involved in Mas 1, staff, participants, group leaders, steering group members. The collective input of women has developed a strength-based project, shaped and led by lived experience.



**COMMUNITY
FUND**

The girl I used to be

On my tear drenched pillow I weep and I willow for the girl I used to be

Confident and loud, proud and outspoken a force that would not have ever been broken.

Who is this quivering shell of I girl I've become the usefulness of nothing but society's 'full time mum'. What's my purpose is there more, will opportunities come knocking at the door.

*For now I feel nothing but fear inside that this is how I'll be forever in hide...
Afraid of the outside Afraid of my shadow Afraid of sound Afraid of tomorrow.*

Lost in the darkness, drowning in day, counting down the minutes just trying to find a way.

*Feeling numb and sorrow with very little joy,
Oh how I long for laughter and tears that turn to joy.*

I want to smile again with my eyes and chuckle with my tummy. I want to feel like me again as well as being a mummy.



For me, Mas has meant my sanity. I first found Mas through a Women's centre. Their services are inextricably linked, through Sure Start, Day Care, crèche services as well as classes, groups, holistic therapies and counselling. I have availed of almost all of the services that have been offered to me and Mas has been a constant.

It's a safe place to talk and feel and be. Women who have similar and different experiences from all backgrounds all linked through motherhood. With my first child I had an almost textbook birth but the aftercare I experienced was below par. I didn't know any better at the time I sat alone with my baby

feeling lost and not knowing what to expect next. Looking back now I realise I may have been experiencing PP anxiety. I loved my baby but it wasn't the overwhelming rush I was expecting. I spent a lot of time with just me and my baby unable to feel prepared enough to leave the house.

I had reached out to Sure Start and that led to me to the Women's centre. ❤️ I was invited to the Mas group and lots of things changed for me. I found people who listened, people who showed up, people who opened my eyes to understand that the things I was going through was normal.



I started attending, as somewhere to be to get out of the house, the fact the women's centre was able to support with childcare during our session was a bonus. Giving me a reason to get up and out, turned into looking forward to participating, engaging in crafts, information and group sessions. The peer support and whatsapp group have been a lifeline, people who were perfect strangers, turned friends.

When I fell pregnant with my 2nd child they were there for me in ways I never expected, these ladies even threw me a baby shower. This time round, through the help of Mas and the experiences and knowledge

I have gained, I was more prepared. I knew to speak up, to reach out and although my 2nd birth was very traumatic for myself and baby, the aftercare we experienced was brilliant. I have been more confident and able to get into a flow of normal life with 2 kids.

I attribute surviving motherhood thus far, to the help of Mas group, and those at the Women's Centre. I whole heartily thank you all for everything you have done for me and my kids.



Having my first during the covid 19 lockdowns was extremely isolating. His arrival into the world was very traumatic and has meant I suffer from postpartum anxiety and separation anxiety. Mas has been my lifeline and the support from other mothers and sense of common ground, being able to speak without judgement has been crucial. Through the Centre I have been able to access counselling. The community of mothers has helped me find ways to cope. The campaigning has helped with my sense of purpose and the activities from arts, gardening to cultural education has been stimulating and fun. I honestly don't know what I would do without Mas. I find the holiday breaks hard and miss my Mas family.

My silver lining

At 37 years old becoming pregnant again was not a happy experience, especially when you had an abusive narcissistic partner. I had thought about abortion many times at the beginning of my pregnancy. I felt I had been tricked or forced into pregnancy, thinking and believing all the narcissistic lies.

My feelings were true. I felt so vulnerable and fell into depression throughout my pregnancy, knowing how much my life was going to change. I had so much freedom before. Now I felt trapped and that my ex-partner had control of me, back to bringing another child up alone, but I knew I was strong, and I could get through it.

My pregnancy was ok, I was only sick at the beginning, and I suffered a lot of stress and mental abuse, right up to 3 days before giving birth, finding out my narcissistic ex was cheating on me and was high into taking prescription tablets, drugs etc. How could you trust this person??

I was brought in to be induced, I had my sister by my side, my ex was nowhere to be seen nor would I want him to be with me during birth.

My birth was a horrible experience. My son almost died during birth and I had an awful time. I had many stitches and I still suffer to this day because of the trauma. He was 8lb 3. I feel like my son felt my pain and didn't want to be born because he could feel my stress from the abuse that I had dealt with.

When my son was born I felt nothing but love, I instantly knew this bundle of joy was my silver lining. Throughout all the heartache and pain I had experienced, I never felt love like it.

It took a long time to recover from my traumatic birth. I would get extremely anxious when out or going walking. I am getting better and learning how to cope and manage it, but there is still a bit to go.

Going to Mas group helped me talk about things mothers would feel uneasy talking about, I made new friends and felt comfortable with these girls. It has helped a lot with my mental health and I hope to gain new experiences from the group. I would a million percent recommend all mothers to go.

Thanks Mas group

Mas: How Its Helped Me!

Hi, I'm part of The Mas Group. I was in a relationship with my then fiancé for 8 years where I suffered domestic abuse, both mentally and physically. We have 3 beautiful babies (10), (6) & (2).

I fell pregnant after we separated. While six and a half months pregnant I lost my Daddy.

My daddy was my world, the one person who was always there. He was my protector, I just adored him and to lose him so suddenly broke my heart.

That's when I immediately felt different about my pregnancy, I didn't care as much as I once did. In my head I'd lost my daddy, that was the worst thing possible I didn't care about much, I didn't care about life.

I spoke to the nurses at the hospital when I went for scans and expressed my concerns about rejecting the baby. I knew I had already but all they said was you will be fine.

The night before I had her, I again expressed my concern to be told I would feel different when I saw her. I had a traumatic birth, it was a planned

caesarean, but my blood pressure and heart rate dropped after she was born, during my sterilisation. They had to close me immediately so only 1 side is completed.

There were complications and the baby ended up in high dependency. I wasn't allowed to breast feed her on the ward to which the HD nurses were horrified and allowed me to latch her on.

It took me to take her for her 8-week injections for my own GP to see something wasn't quite right. I feel that if I had been given the help and support, I had asked for while I was pregnant, I wouldn't have suffered from post-natal depression and anxiety.

That's when my sister recommended Mas. We waited until the baby was 6 months and then I joined and honestly these girls are my lifeline.

We have weekly meetings, a WhatsApp group and arrange nights out every so often. I feel safe, I feel supported, and I don't feel judged.

Through Mas, I have been able to benefit from the women's centre. They have provided counselling services for me and my children. Play therapy sessions for my older 2, and childcare for the baby.

When the baby had her craniofacial surgery. The women's centre staff kept in touch with us through WhatsApp and video calls. Honestly, the support was unbelievable. Something I will be forever grateful for.

I joined Mas feeling like I didn't love my daughter and I was judged and alone. Now thanks to The Mas Project & The Women's Centre I love my daughter and I have a group of friends for life.





I am a mum with borderline personality disorder. I fell pregnant during the first lockdown and gave birth in the second. I missed out on so much. No mum and baby classes. No going out shopping for baby clothes and baby furniture. No baby showers or cool gender reveals that have become a craze. No visitors in hospital. I felt incredibly alone I lost out on the opportunity to get advice from mums that would have been very helpful. My pregnancy was extremely difficult in terms of my partner who I adored started to change and I received a lot of emotional abuse due to him wanting to terminate my pregnancy, and I just couldn't I loved this tiny little

baby who I did not know yet. I was left at 20 weeks pregnant to do it alone. I developed prenatal depression which was followed by the very real and hard postnatal depression when my daughter finally arrived into this big scary world.

We joined the Mas Project in 2021. I needed to meet other mums, build friendships and talk about my daily struggles being a mum with severe mental health issues that many people did not understand. I needed time away from my daughter to do something for myself.

My first week was fine I made normal small talk and boasted about how amazing my child



was and what a great man her father was I didn't want them to see I was crumbling at the seams. However, the following week had been a week from hell. I was raising my child by myself in a separate household from my daughter's father and had enough of feeling so alone and constantly being put down. I left him, I didn't know how I was possibly going to be able to get through this. I walked into the class that Tuesday, I put my mask of a smile on and made a coffee and the lady who became a great support for me asked "Are you okay?" I broke, it all came out as I would say, I was a mess. These kind strangers held me and built me back up that day and comforted me in the fact I can be honest

here and I can tell them how I feel truly I will not be judged and that's exactly what they did slowly but surely I got through it with their help and support.

During my time with Mas Project, I fought for my daughter's well-being against her father who at the time had been absent for 8 months of her life. Through the solicitors' meetings and letters and arguments, it was those girls in the room that kept me strong. I won! I got a residency order for my little girl. I was no longer a door mat I had a voice! I became homeless during that time due to an unstable neighbour and it was no longer safe to live in our first perfect but small little home.

It was the women in Mas Project who came and packed up all our belongings in one day so I never had to go back alone and feel afraid.

I did courses like paediatric first aid. Mental health courses that were giving me the tools to be the best mum I could be. The most important programme I did with Mas Project was a Louise Hay programme called Heal Your Life. I faced the trauma I faced from being raped when I was 17, face-on with the comfort of my friends who were also facing their own trauma. I realised it's time to heal, it's time to move on and it's time to live again.

I had the support and love from these women through everything I've faced in those 2 years. We are a serious force to be reckoned with! Together we have all fought for what's most important to us. We have fought and still fighting for the mum and baby unit. We got the breast-feeding campaign on public transport and we fought for the Pathway fund to stay. I know me and my brave girls from the Mas projects shared a part of our story and with our vulnerability and strength we won! And I will always be proud to stand beside these strong women! We can do anything when we are united and we have proved that time and time again!

Mas project has given me not just friendship and solidarity with these women but it's brought out what I always knew was there, and has given me the space to find out who this new me is. I am a strong, fierce, loud mama bear who will not be silenced ever again. I am not just a woman with trauma, I am all these things because I refuse to be pulled down by my trauma anymore. I will continue my fight for better mental health services, equality and advocacy for women and mothers.

Thank you to the WRDA for creating this absolutely amazing project you changed my life and you may have even saved it. You have created groups of women who have passion and drive and we will not lose this even with the project coming to an end. To my girls in my group, I am unbelievably proud of all of you I've seen you all blossom into the most amazing women and mothers. Our children will always have that little bond and it warms my heart I love you all and will miss our Tuesday group but I know I will see you all often!

"Here's to strong women may we know them, may we be them and may we raise them"





When I joined the Mas project in September 2022 I had a 3 year old, 1 year old and a 2 month old. I was a single mum living at home with my parents in the depths of depression. I had left my relationship with my ex just less than a year prior and I honestly don't remember how I was coping. I left one toxic relationship with my ex and was currently living in another with my parents (I still am).

I've been asked to tell my story and if I'm honest I'm not quite sure where to begin. I grew up in a household that taught me love isn't freely given, it has to be earned. If you aren't smart, funny, pretty, quiet, or obedient you aren't worth anything. It's funny I have always struggled with saying that I suffer from

childhood trauma because I couldn't pinpoint anything specific that happened to me that could be defined as traumatic. But the trauma for me wasn't something that happened, it was something that didn't. The trauma for me is that I don't have memories of physical touch with my mum, where she's helped scoop me up and calm me down when I've been in pain. I had to deal with my overwhelm and my emotions on my own, quietly and behind closed doors. I don't have memories of someone encouraging me when I experienced personal failure when I just felt incapable, stupid and like I couldn't do anything right. No one was there to name the truth, no one was there to help me problem solve or help

me see the capability that was in me. And from that, I feel like what happened with my ex was made possible.

I went into that relationship not knowing how to set boundaries because I had never been allowed them before. I went into that relationship not even being able to notice disrespect because it was how I simply thought people talked to you. Throughout that relationship, I learnt to fear the physical affection I craved from my previously mentioned deprivation. A hug wasn't just a hug, it was a promise of something else that if not fulfilled I was neglecting my role as a partner. No excuse was acceptable, 'I'm tired', 'I'm on my period', 'I only just had a baby a couple of weeks ago.' The corresponding shame kept dragging me down. I ultimately ended up losing ownership of my own body. I wasn't allowed to take birth control, I wasn't allowed to take antidepressants, during or after pregnancy, I wasn't allowed feelings or opinions, I wasn't allowed to say no. I know now that this isn't normal, and that no one has the right to make me feel this way. That my needs matter. But being brought up to be the perfect obedient little girl made this easier. And that's only a scratch to the surface of what I endured in that relationship, I was lazy, a leech, a bad mum. But yet as soon as I offered to

leave he couldn't live without me, he would have to kill himself and it'd be my fault. I'm very glad that all that is only a part of my story now. People have said to me that all that trauma has made me stronger, but I don't agree with that. Trauma gave me some serious trust issues, PTSD, nightmares and massive triggers, it gave me depression and anxiety. What made me stronger was finding support from within the Mas project and other amazing charities, found through connections I made while I was there.

I feel I can stand here and honestly say I am a completely different person from who I was before Mas came into my life. I know my worth now. I know I am enough. I have always been enough. And I'm not talking about obedient, quiet, doesn't have an opinion me. I mean authentic, intelligent, open minded, slightly chaotic me. Through both the classes provided and the other mums in Mas I'm finally starting to figure out who I am and what I want for both myself and my kids. I've been able to see what a great mum I am and how lucky my kids are to have me. Both because I now have an amazing support system of mums behind me and because I am now a stronger and more confident version of myself.

The journey to motherhood can be a very lonely road to travel.

Every journey is different everyone has a different story and experiences to share. My journey to becoming a mother started just after I got married. We got married at Christmas and by the time we went on our honeymoon in February I had suffered my first miscarriage and my happy world had exploded.

I have had spontaneous, missed/silent, complete and incomplete miscarriages. I have experienced sitting for hours and hours in A&E with BBC News repeating hour after hour, to be sent home without being scanned. Then the next day I was in agony and bleeding and being bundled into a car as there was no time to wait in an ambulance. Only god sent that knowing that I could actually go to the ward as I actually had an appointment otherwise we would wait in A&E again. I have done the being sent home to bleed/miscarriage at home and being told to take pregnancy tests after 2 weeks and come back if it is still positive. Being sent home to miscarry opens up a whole different level of worry not to mention the dignity element of potentially passing your baby (pregnancy tissue) down the toilet. It is so undignified and sad having your baby passed like waste through the sewage system. Then there is worry.

Has all the maternal material been expelled from my body? Has some been left behind that hasn't come away? Am I going to get an infection or will this affect my chances of getting pregnant again?

I have made it to various stages of booking appointments at the doctor's and had to explain my history again and again. I have done so many hospital appointments where I have been told size isn't what we would like it to be, that there is no heartbeat, no growth, the sack is empty, get your bloods done to check your levels, come back in 2 weeks for a scan.

I have done the hospital waiting room and I have seen mothers and couples coming out from appointments knowing that they have been delivered bad news amongst the happy parents. I know that look and how that feels as I have done that walk many times. I have even experienced passing the baby sack in my hands and not wanting it to drop into the toilet. I have had maternal material removed without pain medication which added to the trauma and made future examinations even more stressful.

Three miscarriages is the lucky number believe it or not as when you have reached that milestone you can be referred for tests in the hope that you

have some explanation as to why things have been going wrong.

My results provided no answers. I remember saying to my husband we can't leave this appointment without a way forward, you need to be our voice. So thankfully the doctor sent us to London for tests. Those tests suggested sticky blood or raised clotting during pregnancy as a possible explanation, so we had a plan in place.

Things come in 3's so I thought 4th pregnancy would work out. Trying to put the past behind us, we tried to move forward in a positive way. We went to the 12-week scan and we could see the heartbeat, and we were delighted that we had got to this stage. Went to 20 week scan and I remember saying to my husband lets try and enjoy this, there is no reason for this not to be ok. However, some of the measurements were on the low side so we were told to come back in 2 weeks. I could tell there was a problem. Baby's heart had not formed properly, and it was unlikely that she was going to survive. We waited weeks for an appointment in Belfast and the doctor confirmed the same findings.

We had weekly appointments to check the baby. It was very lonely and soul-destroying. No one advised me how to get through. I was crippled with guilt.

Guilt for asking what could be done, guilt of wanting my baby to die, guilt of growing knowing that I was growing a life inside me knowing that I was growing her to let her die. My parents are both dead so I turned to family members for support. Some tried to help not knowing what to do to help, others adopted the approach of ignoring and avoidance or burying their head in the sand, and some offered spiritual guidance. We carried on as best we could I basically hid from the world and really wanted to wake up when it was all over but I had to keep going with the pregnancy until eventually my daughter was born stillborn.

Thankfully I was lucky enough to have my own room in post-natal. But others were not so lucky. When we got moved over to the labour ward I asked for an epidural and was told that I was not dilated enough and that it would be hours left. Unfortunately, we were left on our own. Tea breaks had to be taken which is understandable, but we were left on our own. I had started bleeding and before I knew it the baby's head was crowning, and I was in agony and didn't know what was happening or what to do. My husband ran for help. Then it was all systems go. I remember the midwife telling me not to scream while my husband was trying to keep me on the bed. I had had no parent craft classes so I didn't know what

I was expected to do. No one had talked me through how to deliver your baby who had passed away. I was given an injection and by the time it kicked in I had the baby and was seeing things that still haunt me.

We left the labour ward and thankfully we got our own room. However, I could hear the cries of babies and mothers chatting on the ward beside my room, while I was alone in a room with my baby who was placed in a cooled cradle. She was sent in an ambulance to Belfast for post-mortem. But I was too tired to go with her. I slept I think for 2 days and eventually got discharged with a Sands box which contained my baby's hand and footprints.

I had midwives who came out afterwards and did not know that my baby had died and I had to repeat the same conversation after different visits. We returned to the hospital mortuary and collected our baby in a little white coffin which we took to the graveyard where she was laid to rest. Things after that were a blur, no one knew how to help us, what to say or what to do. Returning to work was a minefield. We carried on and didn't give up hope. We had a succession of miscarriages, now in double digits. I stopped telling people when I had a positive pregnancy test as it was too awkward when things went wrong and managing others' upset.

My husband described me as an onion and with every miscarriage I have had a layer peeled off. He was worried about what would happen if there were no layers to come off. From the outside I was strong but on the inside, I was grieving the life without my babies, what a big family it would have been. We kept trying as I did not want to face the alternative. Finally, in the Covid unknown, we had our son.

Even though in my later attempts I had scans during my fertile windows and had 2 week scans when pregnant for reassurance. I wish there had been consistency with care. When I was pregnant with my son I did not see my consultant. Then my Consultant was changed due to medical needs but I met them once. This led to confusion about the birth plan and conflicting suggestions on the best way forward which was made even more difficult due to covid restrictions. I don't think you can travel through this journey unscathed. I am eternally grateful to the doctors, nurses and staff at the Hospital for safely delivering my son into the world. When I reflect on my experiences and the journey I have travelled there is room for improvement, compassion, better communication and support for mothers with healthy babies, babies with medical conditions, birth trauma, miscarriage and death. Being a part of the Mas group

you are among peers (mums) who have experienced serious issues ranging from birth trauma, death of their babies, postnatal depression, anxiety and even issues that have been suppressed before the journey to becoming a mum and then triggered postpartum.

Motherhood can bring such joy but it can also bring tragedy, a world of turmoil a host of mental health issues. It is ok to be not to be ok. But what do you do when it's not ok? Where do you go? Who can help you? What do your loved ones do? when for many they do not recognise that you are not ok. Who do they go to? What do you do when you can't see the wood for the trees? Doctors can help physically with medications and sign post you to the Mental Health Practitioner. But where is the real help and support?

I have travelled a long, lonely road to motherhood. Some ignored me, others offered spiritual help. What I needed was practical help on how I could get through each day knowing that I was growing my baby to ultimately let her die. Walk a Mile in our shoes. They say that it takes a village to raise a child. We are the village and the families in the village need your help. If we have healthy mothers physically and mentally, we will have healthy happy children and families who can contribute to the village. The Mas group provides wrap-

around support. The group is organic and evolves to meet the group's changing needs emotionally, practically and holistically. It provides wrap-around service support and signposting. It provides crèche and a non judgemental supportive environment with peer support.

What needs to heard?

- Specific and specialised Services
- Compassion, checking in, non judgemental support.
- Specific Training for Mental Health Practitioners
- Specialised Midwives, Health Visitors and Health Care Assistants
- Training for doctors' receptionists
- Flag system in the doctors' systems so that the doctors' receptionists' staff can that the call from a mother is potentially urgent.
- Education and strong supporting and caring services without judgement and full of compassion
- We need an All Ireland Network model for providing Paediatric Pathologists.
- Specific Counselling for miscarriage, still birth and difficult pregnancies

Thank you



*Mixed Sculpture by artist
Wendynicole McGuinness-Keys*

The following three stories are from participants at a Women's Centre. Their experiences are not recent and happened many years ago but have had an impact on their lives and mental health.

When I became pregnant at 20 years old I was overwhelmed and scared. I had worked with children from an early age and did my NVQ level 3 while working in the nursery so I thought I was prepared as well as I could be.

I was petrified but had the support of my partner and my mum. I have suffered from hearing loss since birth and by the time I went into labour it had been gradually fading over the last few years, this made me anxious and nervous because I could not hear everything the doctors were saying to me or everything that was going on around me. They finally broke my waters and took me into the labour room to start pushing. While I was pushing my ears both popped with the pressure and I lost 90% of my hearing within minutes into giving birth, I panicked but because so much was going on no-one was paying attention to the fact I was trying to tell them I couldn't hear anything they were telling me.

I couldn't feel anything because I was numb from the waist down and I couldn't hear anything of what they were telling me about what was going but nobody noticed that I couldn't hear them. When I woke up on the ward after I couldn't hear

my son crying or anything and the nurses were shouting at me because they thought I was ignoring my child. No one took the time to ask if I was okay and when I told them about what was happening I felt that they really didn't care. I felt alone, ashamed and ignored as a new mum this greatly affected my mental health and I spent much of the next few years trying my best but still not being listened to and got to the point I just didn't ask for help anymore.

Being part of Mas project has helped me come to terms with my experiences and realise I am not alone, sharing experiences has helped me loads, meeting new women.

Being part of the centre has literally saved my life it has given me my confidence back. I have learned new skills and have many new friends and it has given me purpose in my life, and I enjoy helping others who are in the same position as I was in.

It was my first pregnancy

and I was very excited and looking forward to meeting my baby but as I got further into my pregnancy things changed unfortunately for the worse. At 20 weeks, I woke one evening in the bed, and felt the sheet, it felt cold and wet, I asked my partner to turn on the light and my goodness the bed was covered in blood, he jumped out of bed and said what is happening I said I am not sure, so he had to go out of the house to use the phone round the corner and I myself tried to clean myself up but the harder I tried the bleeding got heavier, my partner forgot his key to open the door so I had to make my way down the stairs, the bleeding was that bad I had to use a bath towel to try and stop it from getting everywhere.

The ambulance crew arrived, took all the details and said I would have to go to hospital, but I had to go alone as I had another child in the house, they couldn't say which hospital to my partner, at the hospital I was left in a cold, darkish room, no-one only myself feeling alone, isolated scared blood still running off the trolley to the floor feeling cold and nausea I lay for an hour then a nurse appeared wanting to ask questions I told her I was going to be sick got ignored had to repeat then eventually she sorted me out, but it was a horrifying experience.

I lost my baby, no support from the hospital, young mothers need more help.

The Mas project has helped me, by speaking to the other women and sharing my stories and experiences, it's good to know you're not alone.

The Women's Centre has been a great support to me as sometimes I am feeling low, and the women are very supportive, and make you feel welcome and also chat things over and explain things. I would be lost without the centre.

The Training and Education Officer is a diamond, does great by us all, and has time for everyone.

My daughters father committed suicide shortly after she was born, I went to the doctor to ask for help I wasn't sleeping and I was grieving, I felt disconnected from everything even my daughter, he offered me medication. It didn't help the way I was feeling it made me feel worse, When I spoke with him he showed no empathy towards me, he was just doing his job and I felt like he didn't care and as if I didn't matter, I wasn't offered any counselling or even some advice. I was lucky to have my family around me, two weeks later I tried to take my own life. I didn't want to be here anymore but I survived.

My mother took me and my daughter to live with her to take care of us, I was afraid to tell anyone what I had done in fear that my daughter would be taken away from me. One night my mother put my daughter to bed she managed to open the window and fell out from the upstairs bedroom into the back garden. I heard her scream and I ran upstairs, the screams seemed to get further away I ran frantically back downstairs and ran out the back she was on top of the trampoline I grabbed her with such fear that she was badly hurt. She didn't even have a scratch, my mother had only moved the trampoline to where it was that day as she was cutting the grass, I truly believe it was a miracle and her daddy was watching over her. It was at

this moment I realised I needed to do better I needed to do everything in my power to make sure my daughter has me at the best version of myself it woke me up.

I have never told this story to many people before as I am afraid my daughter would be taken from me and the judgement that comes with it so I healed myself without help but it shouldn't be this way. Women should be able to talk openly to get the help they need to be healthy for their children and be the best mum they can be.

The mental health project at the centre has made me realise the traumatic experiences that I have gone through and that I am not alone. It has helped me to accept them and speak about them with people who have had similar experiences as me. I have realised I am not alone and I'm able to overcome it that little bit more than before.



My story will be about the baby I lost in February of 2019.

In some ways it seems like it happened ages ago, we're in 2022 now, but on the other hand, it still seems as though it only happened the February just passed.

It began on a Monday when I was at work. I had gone to the toilet during my break and had noticed I had begun bleeding. It wasn't much just a bit pink, not like in the movies where it's a big gush. So I tried not to worry and carry on with my day, I was only 8 weeks and convinced myself I had been doing too much that day so I tried to take it easy. That was the only symptom I had. I told my partner when I had got

home and we then phoned the maternity unit in the Hospital. They had suggested phoning the early pregnancy unit to book a scan but I figured because it was only pink, and only really when I wiped that it was nothing to worry about. The next morning I was getting my son ready for school when I did feel a bit of a gush. The bleeding had got heavier. I phoned my mum in tears, I was in no doubt now that something was wrong. My dad was then sent to take my son to school while myself and my partner went to the hospital.

At the hospital, they told me they couldn't scan me without booking an appointment at the early pregnancy unit but they

could offer a pelvic examination to see if they could tell what was happening. I agreed and was told that my cervix was still closed so they couldn't be sure about the bleeding. That gave me false hope that I wasn't miscarrying so I decided to watch and wait and rest at home before booking any appointments. That night I changed my mind, I phoned that evening to be told the next appointment was a few days away. I was already worrying now and just wanted to know what was going on. Those next few days of waiting were awful, I told myself it was ok my cervix was closed, and it was probably something else, I looked up stories online of women who had bled but went on to have a healthy baby, anything I could think of to keep the thoughts of miscarriage out of my head.

The day of the appointment arrived, my mum came with me. It was a transvaginal exam, which means they scan inside you, not over your stomach. I had to lie on the bed, in a vulnerable position, waiting. The nurse started off by explaining what would happen and that she would let me know as soon as possible. I stared at the ceiling, holding my mum's hand, to then be told, 'I'm sorry there's no heartbeat'. We both burst into tears and the nurse then said, 'Did you not know', As if I should have expected this so why was I so upset. There were other checks and measurements

that needed to be done so I then had to continue lying there devastated while the nurse finished up. I still think those checks could have been done before giving me that news so I could have had some dignity before my hopes were crushed.

After, I was offered leaflets about different ways to manage the loss. In the end, I chose the natural method. I wanted to be at home, I hadn't fully processed the news and I suppose I wanted to keep my baby with me for as long as possible. I wasn't ready to give them up. I was terrified of losing the baby down the toilet and although I had been told that it was a very likely scenario, I was determined that my baby wasn't going down a drain. This meant that I ended up sieving through miscarriage material to find a baby that was only 8 weeks along. Looking back I clearly was not thinking straight but at the time I felt like that was what I needed to do. I never found the baby and each time I went for a scan to check the progress I was told that the baby was still there.

I then chose to take the pills they had offered to speed up the process, as it had been a week and a half and although there was bleeding and clots, the baby was still not for moving. The medicine was inserted on the Friday and I was told that it should happen over the weekend, I was reminded that if I chose to have the pathologist

look at the baby then I was to place what I found in the container they had provided. I spent that weekend waiting and checking but nothing of significance appeared, no massive clots just what looked like a slightly heavier than normal period. I returned on the Monday for a scan to be told there was now no baby. I was empty. I had found nothing, my partner thinks my body must have reabsorbed the baby. I went on to get pregnant three months later and now have a two year old girl. He says that was her but she wasn't quite ready so my body took her back to wait until she was ready. It's a nice way to think of it but there are times when I miss that baby. I feel like I've been cheated, I don't want another baby, but I do want that baby.

I try to remind myself that I now have two children where if that pregnancy continued I would only have one. I feel guilty that I want more than I already have. They say time is a healer, and sometimes, most of the time I'm ok. But if I dwell too much on it then the emotions come back and I don't know how to resolve it.

People don't talk much about these unresolved emotions. I feel guilty because I had more children after and shouldn't that be enough? We need to be more open about this side of pregnancy loss. That there are

thoughts and feelings that might be lingering and we may need help to deal with them instead of pushing them back and pretending they aren't there.

However, the centre and the Mas project came into my life and has really helped me with these emotions and feelings. I was able to be referred for counselling and the support of the other women has helped me to realise that everyone's feelings are valid, but we don't always talk about them. The group has also awakened a passion for advocating. I took part in one of the groups that was calling for the first mother and baby unit in Northern Ireland. This has given me something to work and focus on, rather than dwelling on the sadness of the loss I can look forward to changing things.





My Journey to Motherhood

I always knew my experience of motherhood may be difficult but not impossible. I was born with Cerebral Palsy and in my early 20s, I was also diagnosed with bipolar. I didn't marry until my mid 30s, but I always held on to the hope of starting a family. In my head and heart, I have had three children but in reality, I've only had one. I have had two miscarriages, prior to having a much-loved and wanted daughter. The first miscarriage wasn't too bad at 8 weeks, everything happened naturally.

However, my second miscarriage was a different story as I required medical intervention. I bled the night before my 12 weeks scan, I knew immediately what this meant. I really feared going in for the scan knowing in all likelihood medical staff would confirm to me I was having a second miscarriage. Although it was my 12 weeks scan the medical staff confirmed the baby only grew for eight weeks. It was a Thursday, and I was advised to attend the hospital again the following Tuesday. On the following Saturday, I was in great pain and had to be taken by ambulance to the Hospital for what is known in medical terms as a "D&C". Immediately after

this operation I felt physically better but emotionally, this miscarriage hit me harder this time, in comparison to my first, and to this day it still hurts more.

I longed to try one more final time for a baby but we decided to leave it for a while. In 2018, I had a beautiful healthy baby girl by emergency C-section. I knew due to my disabilities that giving birth would not be easy and I would need to be supported by a perinatal mental health team. While planning to have a baby I was informed that I could experience a manic episode following the birth of my child due to my Bipolar condition and the hormones that comes with any pregnancy. I was also advised if I got through the first 4 to 6 weeks after giving birth I was less likely to take another manic episode. I knew I was under the care of the only doctor in Northern Ireland at the time who specialised in pregnancy and mental health and perinatal related issues. A plan was put into action, and I felt safe in the care of my consultant and the perinatal team. My consultant and their perinatal team supported my family and I for a whole year after the birth of my daughter and I am glad to report in this time period I did not relapse or have a manic episode. My consultant and the perinatal team were fantastic. I feel very strongly, that all women in N. Ireland need more maternal mental health support and services and secondly, a greater continuity of care so that

every woman does not have to explain their own personal situation to every medical professional they meet. For example, my care plan was not in my medical notes and I had to explain the plan of action that was agreed between my consultant and I. This added to my stress levels. Thankfully for me at the time, I was coherent enough to communicate my needs but if I had taken a manic episode due to my condition of bipolar, I would not have been in the position to communicate effectively. This emphasizes the importance of continuity of service.

I hope by taking this opportunity to share my own personal story I encourage, help and support other women in N. Ireland and hope that they receive the same perinatal mental health services that I received. The MAS project has given me a safe place to discuss with my peers on how having bipolar has impacted on my life, not being judged has really helped my mental health. The Women's Centre has helped and supported me, no matter what help I needed they would always go out of their way to help my family.



If
Grannies
were
flowers
I'd pick
you



Judgement is a funny thing, it takes all your insecurities and confirms them. When I found out I was pregnant with twins the first thing that came into my head was how would I cope. Then the pregnancy went on and my confidence went up. When I was in hospital for pain at 33 weeks one of my placentas came away and I was rushed (and I mean sprinted) for an emergency section. It was terrifying. My twins were premature so they went straight to the NICU and it was that night before I even got to see them. I was so out of it for days on morphine and didn't remember much. I remember two head

nurses bringing me and my partner into a small office, telling us how hard twins were, and it was like bringing 4 babies home. I remember them looking at each other when I told them I have cerebral palsy. It is something that has never stood in my way...until now. They believed solely upon meeting me on morphine and my partner who was very nervous that we would need the support of social services in order to be able to look after our children whom we had planned so much to have home. Over the next few days, nurses in the NICU watched us and judged everything we did. My partner told my son that he

couldn't wait to get him home so that he could keep him up all night...and he could dote over him. They told the social worker that this meant that he was afraid of being kept up all night. Nurses told the staff that I didn't want to go down to see my babies when I was light headed and had to come back to the ward after feeling unwell. The social worker sat us down in a room and said all the things that nurses have said. They told us they didn't think we would be able to raise our twins without support. We felt so afraid coming out of that meeting, we really thought that because the nurses had twisted things that they were going to take our children away. The social worker came out to the house to see it. She picked up on things like we only had 1 packet of nappies when our twins were premature and had to wear premature nappies for a good month or 2. We had already been told the hospital would give us these. They also said that we only had 6 bottles. At this point, I was breastfeeding. Social workers also spoke to my mother and my partner's mother to make sure we had support. This worried our families. The boys were nearly ready to come home but the NICU still had their concerns. One of the boys was ready to come home, the other only got their feeding tube removed that day. We were so excited to have our babies home but we realise now that this twin

was not ready to come home. We were told that a health visitor would be out to visit the very next day. Now I must say this health visitor was lovely. After 4 days of being out one of my sons who obviously wasn't ready to come home became very sick. He was unable to keep his temperature. I remember sitting in ward six at silly o'clock in the morning and them asking were social services involved in the boys. The shame I felt saying yes.

The next year and a half was hard, covid happened and no one could come and help, I was diagnosed with depression, one of my children did not sleep, well he still doesn't sleep and I just really struggled. We never heard a word again from the social worker. I know the health visitor was giving them reports. There was a lot of concern over the weight of one of the boys so she was out a lot more than what they normally come out. About 4 months later we got a letter saying that they had dropped everything. Just like that. They had made these accusations that made us feel so insecure in our parenting and then just dropped it, with no explanation.

I finally got involved with my local women's centre, and my life changed. We had been so terrified of any kind of professional, but with them, I could start to open up. They recommended the Mas

programme. I remember the Mas worker doing a phone call with me to see if I was suitable for the programme. She asked me if I was on medication and I was afraid to answer. Unfortunately, still to this day, there is such a stigma for being a parent with mental health problems. Eventually, I said yes, that I was on citalopram. The way she turned round ever so cheery and said aw I'm on that too, made me feel like I wasn't being judged... probably for the first time in my life.

I'm sitting here thinking about the first time I sat down with The Mas worker and honestly feel so grateful that I barely recognise that girl. She suggested birth trauma therapy. I jumped at the chance because I could not get the flashbacks of the birth and all the NICU trauma out of my head. I wasn't able to move on from it myself. The birth trauma counsellor was amazing and although it was a very difficult process it was one of the best things I've ever done. People said even how much better I looked after it. I felt great.

Fast forward and I still have my bad days, and bad weeks, and yes my summer was tough, but I have a group of girls who understand me more than most people do, on my side. The girls in the Mas programme are amazing. You see we are bonded by the fact that most of us have been let down by the people who were supposed to help us when we had children.

I've made friends that I know I will grow old with. I can go in and literally tell the Mas worker and the girls anything, without being judged...they don't see my disability, they see me. The longer I am a part of Mas the more I am becoming more myself than I have ever been. I go back to that phrase ... No judgment...do you know what that's like to a person whose been judged her whole life...it's amazing,

So here I am...doing this speech about what judgment did to me as a parent. Here's the thing...I have moved on from what happened to me...as much as I think I will anyway...but that doesn't mean it's ok. It's not ok to judge parents so quickly. It's not ok to destroy a first time Mummy's confidence. So I'm here...telling all of you this in the hope that things will change. If one nurse steps back and looks or asks questions before they judge...then this story of mine is well worth it.

LIVE. TOGETHER. GOALS.
OTHERS. HEALTHY.
STRONG. UNDERSTANDING.
WISDOM. KNOWLEDGE. SPIRITUAL.
LOVE. JOYOUS. INTEGRITY. FUTURE.
HARD WORKING. FRIENDLY. LOYAL.
KIND. SMART. EMPOWERED. FAITH.
INTELLIGENT. DARING. HOPE.
CREATIVE. STRONG. CONFIDANT. TRUST.
INDEPENDENT.



FEMME
ZENA
WOMEN
FENYW
DONNA
महिला
女人

MA's Story

I'm 26 years old. I currently have a 2 and a half year-old daughter who keeps me very busy and on my toes. I also work as a classroom assistant, however, it's not what I want to do forever, as I have now found a passion for mums and their mental and emotional wellbeing and health. I love to socialise and meet others in new environments.

My pregnancy was fairly lovely. No sickness, just the usual aches and pains as time goes on. I was so grateful. However, I was pregnant in 2020 during Covid so dealing with the fears, deaths, sicknesses, and overall difference in what should have been a 'normal' pregnancy. That was far from it. I spent basically the whole 9 months isolated and lonely. I got furloughed right away from my work and from then I went on maternity leave. I had no chats with other mums about parenting. My fears and excitement. However, I am grateful for the time I got to spend relaxing, sleeping and doing what I wanted basically, and I know I will never get that again.

Then comes 40 weeks, 5 days... I got the sweep, and they noticed my blood pressure was high, so I was booked for an induction ASAP. I was thankfully unaware of how dangerous and serious that can be due to not talking to anyone about it. Fast forward

to the next day and I am sitting waiting to be induced and the heart rate monitor goes off... again I just thought the baby had moved. NOPE, within 15 minutes, I was rushed to have an emergency C-section as my placenta had split (very rare). Put to sleep not knowing if me or baby was going to make it. Extremely traumatizing and scary.

My hospital experience was far from normal. I love that the staff sprang into action to save my baby and me. However, that night when I was alone, confused, traumatized by everything. I never received much if not any support. No one told me what I could or couldn't do. No one helped with breastfeeding. (That's a topic I am very passionate about). I also had a nurse say, *'Have you changed babies' nappy? You know you shouldn't leave your baby in a dirty nappy'!!* I'm lying there with a catheter in, had an emergency operation... surviving on zero hours of sleep. I thought that's what the nursing staff were for. To help and support you and the baby.

I was a lot happier to get out of the hospital which isn't a nice feeling. I was also sad because she was immediately bottle fed because I didn't receive enough support or guidance from the hospital.



From going to Mas, I have gotten to be me again. I have found who I am after losing her to covid and mum life. I have also gotten a sense of purpose and met lots of amazing women. The advice I would give to new and expectant mums would be just go with it and trust yourself. People will try and tell you how to parent but you do you. Trust your gut and your own mum instinct. Also please ask for help because we aren't superhuman. Mas is a lifeline for a lot of people. Mas is the one thing that makes a mum feel good and worthy. A lot of women spend most of their days sorting their children. Mas gives them something for themselves. I love it.

Covid played a massive part of course in visiting etc. but you just had to do what was safe.

When I joined the Mas group My FIRST thoughts were omg, I can't talk anymore but I need to see people and other mums. I have been in Mas from the beginning and have been able to share my story a lot. Creating awareness and showing the reality of what so many women go through. We all appreciate the health service, however so many women have a negative experience, and it will stay with them forever. I have also found my passion and I would love a career focused on women's mental health and wellbeing.



My first pregnancy was complicated and high risk because of a blood disorder but no one had explained to me what that actually meant before I was pregnant.

When I became pregnant, I had to assume a very strict diet and I was told that if I didn't my blood fats would rise, and my body could try to abort my baby, or I could develop acute pancreatitis and we both could potentially die. This gave me extreme anxiety from the offset. Whilst I was monitored closely throughout the pregnancy and referred to the SWAN team for support each time I saw a different midwife for check-ups and had to explain my condition and how I was feeling every time. Thankfully this was alleviated when I had the consistency I needed through the SWAN midwife.

During the pregnancy, I developed gestational diabetes and severe pelvic griddle pain to the point I was on crutches. These were contributing factors to me being induced at 38 weeks. I was really set on having a "natural" birth but knew going into the induction that this may not potentially happen. During my labour I had a cannula inserted which caused me pain, I told the midwives my hand was sore but was told it was normal. A day later my hand was twice the size and the anaesthetist was called, it turned out the cannula was tissing and it

was removed and replaced. At this point, contractions began but there was little progress and I was recommended for a C-section.

I feel that if I had of been listened to when I started to complain about the wrongly placed cannula, I could have had a different birthing experience and achieved the natural birth that I longed for with my first pregnancy. As I knew I could attempt a natural birth the next time, I did not dwell on this experience.

When I discovered I was pregnant for a second time I was told a natural birth shouldn't be a problem and I was under the care of the SWAN team again. Complications arose and it was decided that I needed to be induced at 37 weeks. For the next 31 hours I waited, I kept asking when my waters would be ruptured as I felt the longer it was left my chance at a natural birth would be slim. At 10 p.m. 2 midwives and a manager came in with full PPE and closed all the curtains. One by one we were told we had been exposed to covid on the ward and we were now in isolation. My anxiety went into overdrive as I didn't know what this meant or if I would be allowed a birthing partner.

We were assured that we could have birthing partners in the ward as we were exposed on the ward and not positive upon arrival. I was assured I was next

in line to go to the birthing suite. At this point the magnitude of the situation was hitting me I felt alone, scared and anxious. I protected myself and my unborn child shielding before the birth and the hospital was where I was exposed. In need of support, I went to the bathroom for privacy and called my mum to help me cope with the intensity of the situation. When I returned to my bed 20 minutes later, they had taken another woman to break her waters. I was angry, annoyed and upset even further. I was told I was next having been the longest patient there, again I felt like I didn't matter and was being lied to.

Once again my experience in labour was affected by a lack of communication/information and feeling like I wasn't being listened to. From the midwife finally telling me the reason I wasn't taken first was that they were waiting on a doctor as I had a high risk of water rupture as the baby wasn't engaged and they were afraid of cord prolapse. To having to endure a procedure that wasn't fully explained nor the pain levels that I would experience. I felt alone, unsupported and scared as I counted down the four hours before I went down for delivery. In delivery I was taken to an induction room that was agreed I wouldn't be in, when I told the midwife of this she simply said she was not aware. Again, I felt not listened to. There were a lot

more monitors than there were with my 1st pregnancy, and I wasn't allowed out of bed in the beginning. I could hear the woman next door labouring. I stated to the midwife I could hear her to which the midwife replied she could also. As time went on, I was trying to focus on getting into labour all the while hearing the woman next door screaming. I tried to distract myself with various things but could not as all I could hear was the woman next door and longing for myself to go into labour.

I was checked and was told that I was 2cm dilated and that I wasn't progressing. I couldn't be left much longer and was told to prepare myself for possible a C-section. I was really disheartened and upset at this point. In the next room, I could hear the woman screaming and words of encouragement from the midwife and birth partner. *"One more push, you can do it"* and then I heard the tiny cries of the new baby. I was thankful her labour was over, but I was still longing for mine to start. At this point I was on the maximum level of Pitocin; I was having 5 contractions in 10 minutes, and they were coupling. Shortly after I was told I couldn't go any longer and had to go for a C-section. At this point, I was very upset and reluctantly agreed to the C-section as there was nothing left that I could do.

None of the agreed birthing plan was actioned, my baby was taken for non-urgent checks, my husband was not given the choice to cut the cord and shortly after they were taken away to the recovery room. Again, I was in there alone, scared and not listened to. My husband had to sit out in the car for hours as there was a delay in my transfer up to the room. As we were now being treated as covid positive I was not offered any help. Still enduring the side effects of having a C-section I felt groggy, exhausted and not in my right mind at all. I knew I couldn't look after this tiny human in my arms, I was petrified of falling asleep while feeding him and unintentionally harming him. I had expressed milk from induction suite and asked for support from the midwives and was told no. Nobody could watch him and he couldn't leave the room as we were both being treated as covid positive. I asked if they could do another covid test as I was negative on arrival and this was refused. My son had bad jaundice and had to be put in an incubator. Because of covid the incubator was placed in my room. I was left alone in my room to watch my newborn in an incubator. They took bloods from him to test his jaundice levels. This had to be attempted twice as his veins collapsed, I ended up having to hold my screaming newborn down as a doctor took bloods from him.

We were in for a couple of days. My only contact or conversation was with the SWAN midwife who came in to check on my moods. Over the next couple of weeks, my moods were up and down and all over the place. I never experienced 'baby blues' with my first child but assumed that this was what was happening to me now.

The health visitor checked in with me regularly afterwards and I did feel supported but my moods never picked up and I was starting to experience widespread pain throughout my body. When the time came for my 6 week check up with the doctor, I told them what happened and all I was offered was medication for my moods. I didn't want to feel numb and disconnected so I rejected the medication. I just needed someone to talk to. I felt like I had experienced a death and not a birth. Over the coming weeks, my mood and the pain got worse. I was still seeing my SWAN midwife. As a result of what I went through it has been hard to create a bond with my second son. The SWAN team sign posted me to the ABC pips service. I was taken on as an out of area client.

My health visitor encouraged me to contact my GP to seek help for my moods, trauma experience and the pain I was experiencing. The SWAN midwife told me I needed to be seen by the peri-natal mental health



team. I later learned that I was referred to Mental Health Services as I didn't meet the criteria for the perinatal mental health teams. I was discharged and placed on a waiting list for CBT therapy which had a two year waiting list. After asking for help for so long, I was back to where I started.

Through my health visitor, I was able to enrol my children into a crèche and through this crèche, I was introduced to a group called Mas. I was in despair. At this point, the MA's group referred me to counselling and encouraged me to contact the doctor again about my physical health to which I was referred to rheumatology and have received a diagnosis of fibromyalgia. Without the

support of the MA's group, I wouldn't have gotten this far. I was given a new lease of life, a voice and the tools needed to soothe my anxiety. I also gained friendships and support when I felt alone. In the beginning, I was given a reason to leave the house and Wednesday soon became my favourite day of the week. I am so thankful I had the opportunity to participate in the programme as there was no support coming from the other channels you would expect. The group leader has been a rock, anytime I need a chat or support I am always listened to and guided in the right direction.

To this day I still suffer from the effects both mentally and physically albeit I can now cope better. I am now seeing a psychologist within the maternity hospital helping me process the trauma, however, this has taken 2 very long years. The whole way through this experience I felt like I had been screaming for help and no one was listening until Mas. Postnatally, there's a great lack of care and support. This isn't good enough. I found this help within the Mas Project and I don't know where I would be today without it.



My pregnancy was very tough with sickness, pelvic pain and back pain.

I was midwife led and at each midwife appointment, I was seen by a different midwife. I felt anxious about this as I couldn't make a connection to one particular person. Therefore my anxiety around first time pregnancy was not properly explored. I had on numerous occasions told the midwives that I was experiencing spasm like pains in my stomach this was around the 36 week mark and I was told that this was normal and just baby moving as he was getting bigger.

I was sent to foetal assessment after one appointment as baby's heart rate was higher than normal. I was left in a room on my own to get his heart rate checked for about an hour or so. I was anxious as he hadn't moved as much as normal I asked the nurse if was everything ok and she said yes, when I asked if I could have a

scan to check baby was ok I was told they couldn't do that and he was ok from his heart rate. My son was born with the cord wrapped around his right leg and his foot and it was completely turned out. Although I am not a professional. I believe what I was experiencing in my stomach was his foot trying to get free from the cord. Had I been scanned at this time they would have seen this and seen how big he actually was and that there was very little amniotic fluid around him. He was 10lbs 4oz when he was born.

Throughout my stay in hospital when I was taken in to be induced I had different doctors in every day telling me different things, I had one doctor tell me to not eat anything to see how my bowels were going. Then another doctor came and asked me why I wasn't eating which was confusing for me. I had to have an emergency C-section after approximately 48 hours in labour to a further 18 hours

in active labour. Two days after I had emergency surgery to remove a 9cm blood clot in my stomach. I was put on IV antibiotics after this however on the Thursday after a week of being in hospital I was advised by a midwife that if I wanted to get home that day to speak with the doctor.

I spoke to the doctor and I was given the impression that I could go home as I was ready to get home to my family. However, this was retracted after I had gotten my hopes up to finally going home after a long exhausting mentally draining time in hospital while also being in a room of my own. I was never once told during my time that I would need to be monitored on an oral antibiotic after the IV therefore the communication was lost which had upset and affected my anxiety and mental health more.

I pleaded with them to get home as my mental health was really suffering in the hospital not having family around me for longer than an hour a day when I could barely look after myself never mind a newborn baby. Had I been told what was to happen next I would have been more settled and knowing I was getting home on Friday. I discharged myself on the Thursday night and knew I would recover better at home with my family around me. Because I had discharged

myself the attitudes of the health professionals around me had changed and I felt so upset and even more anxious. I feel that as a first time mother I was let down and not given the proper bedside manner that I deserved after the trauma I had gone through to get my baby here. I was told on an occasion when I was quite upset as I was in pain that *"crying was not going to make it better"* by a midwife which left me really upset.

I feel that there could have been more compassion and communication between all health professionals and that especially first time mothers should be listened to when asking questions and feeling anxious about their pregnancies.

Being a part of the Mas group has helped me a lot with my mental health and trying to get back out there and chatting with other Mammy's who have experienced similar trauma and knowing you are not alone, it's a relaxing environment and a chance for mummies to get time to themselves which is needed and I feel the Mas project should be supported for years to come as it's really beneficial and I don't know where I would be today if I didn't have it, I have made some friends for life and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share my experience.

1st Baby

When I found out I was pregnant with my 1st child I was so happy. My pregnancy was all normal I was supposed to be due on the 17th of March but my water broke on the 12th of March and went into labour with her. I had to be cut and forceps used to get the baby out, she was then put on my chest I completely fell in love with my 8lb baby.

2nd Baby

4 years later I found out I was pregnant with my 2nd baby again everything went well I went into labour with her on the 1st of April I started to get pain with her at midnight the night before, and I had started to bleed a wee bit with the pain at this point phoned the hospital and was told to come up straight away, I had the baby at 10.25am 8lb 5 ounces little lady.

3rd Baby

4 years later I found out again I was pregnant I was so happy and over the moon, at 6 weeks I started to bleed phoned the hospital sent to the early pregnancy unit, I was given a scan the heartbeat was strong told to go home and rest, come back up a week later to be told that I had lost my baby, overload with thoughts and fears thankfully my husband supported me throughout.

4th Baby

So 6 weeks later I found out I was pregnant again I was so happy but scared at the same the thought of losing the little one, sent to the early pregnancy unit at 6 and 12 weeks everything going okay strong heartbeat. My son was born on the 28th of October weighing 10lbs he was born through emergency C-section once we heard that cry it was such an amazing feeling.

5th Baby

After 4 years we decided to try for another baby, at this time I am only 8 weeks pregnant and planning a C-section birth will keep you up to date on how it goes.

The Mas project is helping me with everything I have recently had a baby and the support I am getting is so helpful.

The Women's Centre has helped me to meet new people and helped me to grow as a person.



Track and Field

Black, Red, Orange, Yellow, Green.
All the colours of Jelly Babies.
Some wearing Letterman jackets,
Others in their School sports kit,
All are warming up their short squishy limbs.

Sprints, Marathons, Hurdles, Relay.
Whom would choose Jelly Babies as runners!
Usain Bolt is as slow as molasses,
When up against those tiny gel legs.

Long jump, High jump, Triple jump, Pole Vault.
Built for speed, not vast distances,
Doesn't matter if vertical or horizontal,
Can only go the length of their stumpy body.

Discus, Shot put, Javelin, Hammer.
These items are catapulted!
No World Records will be broken,
But a medal will drape around each neck.
Then I realise, every Jelly Baby athlete has my son's face!



This poem is about the first delusion that I experienced after my Birth Trauma. I had been moved from the Intensive Care Unit to the Maternity Ward and introduced to my child. As we did skin-to-skin contact to start the bonding process, vivid colours swirled around us and solidified into Jelly Babies doing the above activities.

It wasn't until I started with the Maternal Advocacy Support (Mas) Project that I found my voice to talk openly about my experiences, and understand what had happened and why, which eventually led me to study more about Perinatal/Maternal Mental Health. Poetry has been part of my recovery and healing.

I've become a senior peer mentor, obtained qualifications from Open College Network, campaigned for the necessity of a Mother & Baby Unit (MBU) in Northern Ireland, and been the voice and face for Mas Project on radio and television. My involvement has allowed me to interact with other groups, which has given me opportunities to explore other methods of highlighting and informing people about Maternal Mental Health and furthering the MBU cause.

I am a very proud twin mummy to 3 year old identical, sassy and very independent girls.

My journey began in December 2021. I had recently been diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety and was really struggling with my mental health and negative suicidal thoughts. After a mental health assessment, I was referred to a local women's centre and the Maternal Advocacy and support group. I remember the first day I walked into the Centre, it was so warm, inviting and welcoming I knew I was in the right place, A safe place!

Thank Goodness for the Mas Project ... Through my journey with them over the last year I feel like I've found a piece of me again. Someone I can begin to recognise in the mirror. I have completed many courses on becoming a better me, paediatric first aid, perinatal mental health courses, and living life to the full to name just a few. Most importantly though, I have mummy friends who just get it, and who understand your worries, nerves, highs and lows. Who support, listen, laugh and cry with you. Absolutely no judgment... I am hugely proud of the work I have been able to be involved in - which includes seeing the launch of the Breastfeeding campaign with TransLink, Campaigning for a much needed Mum and baby unit in Northern Ireland, Launching our flyer for health

care professionals at Stormont on what we as mothers want to see changed from these professionals. As well as sharing my journey and lived experience by speaking to local MLA councillors and Early Years Practitioners on educational cuts in particular The Pathway Fund. Which I am delighted to say we got reversed and we saved the funding.

I have recently taken steps to complete courses to become a group leader for Mas for our women's centre and also a Maternal Mental Health Association Champion so I can welcome and support other mothers on their journeys to know that there is help out there and where they could turn. Mas project really has been an important and vital resource in my mental health journey and I hope it will continue to support other women for years to come.

*Thank-you
for reading my story.*

I joined Mas when I was a single parent of 3 and struggling with post-natal depression and severe anxiety.

My children were solely dependent on me, my youngest daughter was born 3 months before lockdown. I spent my days crying. I barely slept or ate. I was borderline underweight and struggled with intrusive thoughts.

My kids were confused by what was wrong with their mummy. I tried to act normal with them but found it difficult. I would get angry over small things and then feel extreme guilt. I thought I wasn't a good enough mother.

I didn't want to go to the doctors for fear that social services would get involved. I didn't know that it was poor mental health that was making me feel this way and just felt like a failure.

It wasn't until I joined Ma's and they told me I was a great mother and person, that finally I started to believe them. I had never heard of Mas until my local women's group recommended that I put my name forward for it. It was the Mas worker who rang me asking me to come to the next group. I was scared going to it but it was the best decision I have made. I sat and cried the first day, barely speaking or making eye contact. This carried on for the next few groups. This group was the start of the change in my life

that I needed. Mas gave me the courage to face my fears and throughout the next few months, I became stronger. I was able to recognise that what I was feeling was normal and I was starting to feel better.

I met the most amazing group of women who changed me and my children's lives for the better. I was a shell of a person and without their help and support, I don't know if I would be here today.

The Mas worker encouraged me to try counselling and sent a referral for me. I've recently started this and am benefiting from it. My children are a lot more settled and thriving in their young lives. I have come back to a normal healthy weight, no longer the girl with the low BMI. I am proud of who I am and what I have achieved.

I still have struggles like everyone else, but thanks to Ma's I have the tools and support to keep winning this 'game of life'.

I've also recently completed the Ma's group leader training which has enabled me to volunteer as a Ma's group leader and I hope one day I am able to support others the same way I have been helped.



Mas Matters

From our own lived experiences:
What needs to change in the h...

Communication

It would help if you could talk to plain English and with our permission, please communicate with other healthcare professionals who we have been in contact with. Take good notes and read the notes so that we don't have to explain our situation again and again, it is exhausting. When someone debriefs you and tells you what's going on, it calms you down. Many of us have been left in limbo with no answers and fearful that something is wrong. With better communication, we believe that our experiences could be improved.

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Judg...

Some of us were of belief with our old... The ju...

Compassion

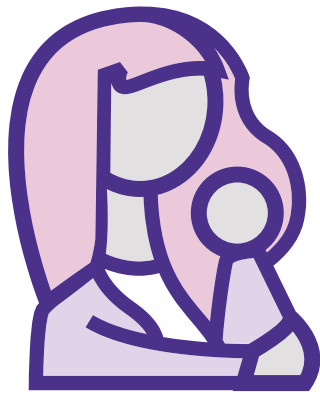
Kind words would make a big difference. Most of us experienced kindness in a healthcare professional but not always. It makes us feel upset when we receive care without kindness. We understand that delivering difficult news is hard but when this is spoken with compassion it does help us.



The Mas project was developed and is led by Women's Resource & Development Agency and is delivered across women's centres. The project provides maternal mental health peer support groups and encourages women to get involved in advocacy, campaigns and share their own lived experience with the aim of improving services in the future. Progression and development is a key aspect of Mas. Women are encouraged to access other support services and educational courses in the centre and in their local area. Women also have the opportunity to access training and become group leaders. This project is shaped, led and developed in partnership with women.

<https://wrda.net/maternal-advocacy-and-support-project-the-mas/>





The Mas Project

Maternal Advocacy and Support

