

The Working with Parents section

In the Working with Parents section this issue, Sally Marchant reports on a successful and innovative new helpline set up as part of the London Borough of Hackney's Reducing Infant Mortality Programme, and Louise Dunn describes how service user involvement has developed in East Lancashire and the role which the NCT has played in it.

Reaching all parents:

user involvement in socially diverse East Lancashire

East Lancashire has specific needs and demands that are unfortunately not unique. We have higher than national average infant and perinatal mortality rates, high teenage pregnancy rates, and the second highest female mortality rates for our county. It is also a diverse area: for example, 32% of the population accessing maternity services come from a South Asian background. There is also high unemployment and a number of isolated rural areas.

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In his 2007 review of health care in England, Lord Darzi stated that services should be 'tailored to the needs and wants of each individual, especially the most vulnerable and those in greatest need'.¹ Therefore the real challenge of good service user involvement is to be able to hear the needs of these women and for them to be able to have a voice within maternity services.

For several years, East Lancashire Maternity Services have actively welcomed service user involvement and, although not an automatic part of the system, there is still a strong ethos of working with local communities and a belief that services can only be made better through collaboration with women and their families.

The NCT locally has played a key role in encouraging this mother-centred approach which is second nature within

our organisation but can feel quite alien in a hospital setting. In this area there has been a long history of NCT membership on groups such as the MSLC which has helped to push forward the role of service users.

My own involvement with local maternity services began whilst I was training to become a breastfeeding counsellor. I was invited to sit on a breastfeeding forum involved in maintaining Baby Friendly accreditation at the Royal Blackburn Hospital. That was nearly eight years ago, and since that time I have been more and more interested in the benefits of involvement of local women and their families in their maternity services. As chair of the local MSLC, I am keen to see this user involvement extended into all areas of the maternity service.

User involvement in East Lancashire

Service user involvement in East Lancashire has developed in several areas. These range from the more common areas of user forums, MSLCs and consultations, to more pioneering areas such as research, and by using innovative approaches such as volunteer programmes and even theatre productions.

Women can volunteer to work in the antenatal clinics or provide breastfeeding peer support on the postnatal wards of the Royal Blackburn Hospital and the Burnley General Hospital. Volunteers receive training and on-going support and often go on to find paid employment or branch out into other areas of service user involvement.

One such mother who did this is Amanda, who became involved in the service through encouragement from her midwife during her third pregnancy, a pregnancy during which Amanda had many concerns: 'I was pregnant with my third child and, having previously suffered



from depression, I was really scared of it returning. I felt I had failed as a parent before and didn't have much confidence in my abilities this time round'.

With support from her midwife, Amanda became active at her local children's centre and then, after successfully breast-feeding her daughter, trained as a breast-feeding peer supporter, which resulted in her volunteering on a postnatal ward supporting other mothers. Since then, Amanda has had the confidence and support to develop further skills: 'I have now trained and participated in research in partnership with midwives, health visitors and the local university and have established a service user group for the development of birth centres. I also received funding to become a doula, since I wanted to support women in pregnancy and labour. I know how much having a baby can really change your life and your outlook on life, and I want to share my enthusiasm and passion.'

'Lay research'

Service user involvement in research is a growing area in East Lancashire. Lay research, as it is sometimes called, is not particularly common within women's health, but the research midwife in our area is keen to develop the role of lay researchers.

I, in my role as the NCT rep, along with other local women, have developed a Women's Health Lay Research Panel which aims to be a link between the research projects that exist and the communities they may affect. This also pro-

vides us with an opportunity to influence the projects that are chosen and to become involved in research projects ourselves.

One such project looked at women's awareness of diabetes in the local South Asian community. Volunteers (pictured above, showing the banners made by older women in the community illustrating their feelings about gestational diabetes) received training in interviewing techniques and worked closely with a local university to carry out this research.

I believe that this project demonstrates the kind of genuine win-win situation that can result from service user involvement. Not only did the research inform the local service about the needs of local women, but as the researchers were from the communities that are particularly affected by

this condition, their work created a real ripple effect in raising the awareness of this issue. Through the training and the experience, the women have increased their skills, helping some to go on to gain employment.

Theatre

The Birth Day Theatre Group is an example of how local women can develop a strong and powerful voice within their local service. The women involved (pictured below) all had traumatic births and were keen to use their experience to positively influence service provision, and decided to use theatre to do this.

Although each birth was different, they shared similar themes such as lack of self-belief, loss of control and a feeling of powerlessness. These stories were woven into a play which has been performed locally and further afield.

The above examples show that user involvement is not just about listening to people's views, but also about enabling women to become involved so they can influence maternity services. This in itself can lead to the development of the individual and their communities, as well as ultimately leading to better maternity services. It also has the benefit of creating networks between communities which, as an NCT rep aiming to represent local women, has been hugely beneficial to me.

References:

- 1 Darzi A. *Our NHS our future: NHS next stage review – interim report*. London: Department of Health; 2007. Available from: <http://www.ournhs.nhs.uk/2007/10/lord-darzi-laun.html>

