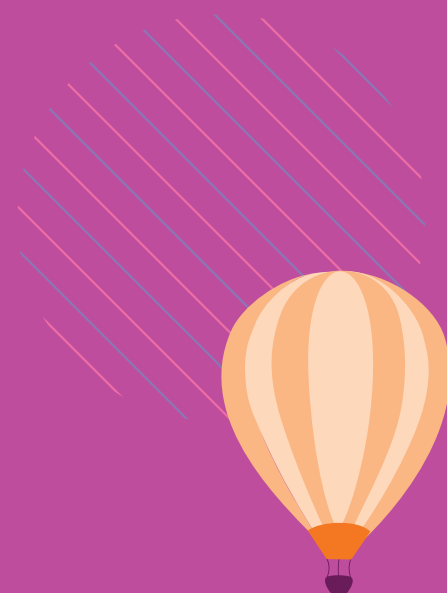


Summary Briefing

# The maternal mental health experiences of young mums

October 2023



Children & Young People's  
Mental Health Coalition



Maternal Mental  
Health Alliance

A new briefing from the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and the Maternal Mental Health Alliance explores the maternal mental health experiences of young mums aged 16-25. The briefing is based on first hand insights from young mums and a rapid review of the literature. Through focus groups, we spoke to young mums from across the UK about their experiences of service provision and support, and listened to their views on what needs to change to better support young mums and their mental health.

The briefing finds that although young mums aged 16-25 are at higher risk of experiencing mental health problems during pregnancy and after birth, they can face significant barriers in accessing support and where they do access support, experiences of services can be poor.

Based on feedback received from young mothers, the briefing identifies 4 priority areas for action to better support the needs of young mothers:

- 1 Listen and respond to the needs of young mothers in national and local systems
- 2 Resource and invest in universal and preventative services
- 3 Ensure access to specialist mental health services
- 4 Research and listen to the voices of young mums

### A note on terminology

This briefing uses the term 'mothers' and 'mums', but we recognise that perinatal mental health issues affect women, gender diverse individuals and people whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth.

It is vital that support services take an inclusive approach to provide support to all birthing people for their mental health and wellbeing.

### Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks go to the twenty young mums who shared their insights and hopes. Their experiences and voices are intentionally a core thread running throughout this summary to ensure at the heart of decisions about the maternal mental health of young mums, lies lived experience.

We would also like to thank the four organisations who supported the young mums and are featured in the main report highlighting how they make a difference to the maternal mental health of young mums: **Mumsaid**, **Ty Enfys Project**, **Home-Start Renfrewshire & Inverclyde** and **The Parent Rooms**.

## Key facts and figures

In 2020, **1 in 4 births** in England and Wales were to young people aged 16-24 (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Young mothers aged 25 years and under are at an increased risk of experiencing mental illness during pregnancy and after birth compared to those over 25, with **postnatal depression up to twice as prevalent in teenage mothers** compared to those over 20 (Public Health England, 2016).

Suicide remains the leading cause of direct maternal death in the first postnatal year, and between 2018 and 2020, there was **an increase in the number of teenage maternal suicides** (MBRRACE-UK, 2022).

Many young mums face additional difficulties, which can **contribute to poor mental health**. These risk factors include, but are not limited to, experiences of care, isolation and loneliness, housing difficulties, poverty, and employment discrimination.

Young parents are more likely to feel lonely. **Almost half (49%)** of mothers aged between 18 and 25 are often or always lonely compared with 37% who are aged between 26 and 30 (Co-op and British Red Cross, 2016).



Young people who grow up in the care system are around **2.5 times more likely** to become pregnant compared with other teenagers (Barnardo's, 2022).

Young women who became teenage mothers are **22% more likely to be living in poverty at age 30** than their peers (Public Health England, 2016).

Many young mums **experience significant stigma**, which can contribute to poor mental health and can prevent young mothers from seeking help.

# What needs to change?

Support for young mums aged 16-25 has been notably absent from the policy agenda in recent years. Whilst efforts have been focused on reducing the number of teenage pregnancies, less attention has been paid to the support needs of young mums and historically young parenthood has been framed as a problem.

Many of the young mothers we spoke to for the research, reported accessing support from health care services such as their GP, health visitor and from mental health services, yet experiences of these were not consistently good. In particular, the young mums described feeling judged by some services and professionals for being a young mum and that assumptions were made about them as a parent.

**“A dream city would have a GP that doesn’t threaten to send social services to your door for opening up when you are struggling, because that is the main reason a lot of young mums are struggling with their mental health because they are afraid of losing their kids.”**

**“They tell you, not help you.”**

**“As a young mum, you do feel judged a lot.”**

Young mums overwhelmingly said they want non-judgemental, accessible, and flexible services that listen to them. This included being able to have concerns about their child’s health and their own health taken seriously and being made to feel valued as a parent.



## Building a dream city of support

We asked the young mums who took part in our focus groups to firstly tell us the services they would like to access if they lived in a 'dream city' of support and secondly, the professionals they would like to receive support from. The young mothers identified a range of different services and features of services that they would like to see in place.

*Breastfeeding support*

Activities and spaces for mums

*Education support*

**SUPPORT AFTER BIRTH**

*To be taken seriously*

Flexible and accessible services

**SERVICES WITHOUT STIGMA**

*To be listened to*

**GOOD PUBLIC TRANSPORT**

*Health visitors*

Baby and toddler activities

**CHILDCARE**

Open and understanding GP

*Support for child*

Mental health services for children

**COST-FREE**

A young mums midwife

**HOUSING SUPPORT**

**SUPPORT FOR DADS**

*An advocate for young mums*

# Four priority areas for action

In order to improve the support available to young mothers, we have identified four key areas for action that must be taken forward in order to better support the mental health of girls and young women. These action areas include recommendations for further work and research, including specific action required in the devolved nations.

1

## Listen and respond to the needs of young mums in national and local systems

It is crucial that we change the conversation from simply preventing young pregnancies to supporting young women who become pregnant, and that those who are aged 16-25 are included in these conversations. Nationally, a clear direction needs to be set to ensure that the needs of young parents are considered within policy development and service design. Further work to support young parents could also form part of the Start for Life programme currently being run by the Department of Health and Social Care.

At a local level, the move to Integrated Care Systems and Health Boards provides an opportunity to ensure that comprehensive and evidence-based support is provided to girls and women during the perinatal period. In order to commission holistic support pathways which specifically consider the needs of young mothers, health commissioners should listen to and work with young mums to co-design these pathways to ensure they no longer fall through the gaps in support.

2

## Resource and invest in universal and preventative services

Young women, babies and families need access to a whole range of services to support their needs. Universal services such as midwives, GPs and Health Visitors have a vital role to play in identifying women and girls who are having difficulties with their mental health, providing support where possible and ensuring they get access to specialist care when they need it.

Health visitors in particular offer preventative health support, yet this is an area that has seen significant reductions in its workforce in recent years. Between 2015 and 2023, health visiting numbers have decreased by 40% (Institute of Health Visiting, 2023). It is crucial that action is taken to increase the numbers of health visitors, school nurses, midwives and other vital public health teams to support children having the best start to life.

Newly developed Family Hubs also provide an opportunity for support for young mothers to be provided for in a friendly and accessible setting. To date, funding has been provided for 75 local authorities in England to set up new or transformed family hubs. However, no further information has been published on when Family Hubs will be universally distributed across all areas of the country.

**“I think the actual maternity staff within the birthing unit postnatal and antenatal need to be trained in mental health because that’s where my mental health spiralled... I just assumed that these people were trained in that.”**

### 3

## Ensure access to specialist mental health services

The expansion of specialist mental health services, both perinatal mental health services and children and young people's mental health services (NHS CYPMHS) has been a priority for the NHS over recent years. For example, the NHS Long Term Plan committed to a further 24,000 women to be able to access specialist perinatal mental health care by 2023/24. The plan also pledged to expand access to NHS CYPMHS so that by 2023/24 at least an additional 345,000 children and young people aged 0-25 would be able to access support. Some young women may be receiving support from these services prior to becoming pregnant and/or during their pregnancy.

Whilst positive progress has been made in expanding these services across the UK, many girls and women are still not able to access the support they need, and some experience inequalities in access. The Covid-19 pandemic has also had considerable impact, delaying the development of services and placing additional pressure.

For example, findings highlighted by the Maternal Mental Health Alliance show that between January and December 2021, over 16,000 women in need of support from perinatal services were not able to access specialist care (Maternal Mental Health Alliance, 2023).

It is crucial that both existing specialist children and young people's mental health services and specialist perinatal mental health services receive sufficient funding and resourcing to ensure specific consideration in meeting the needs for young mums.

It is also vital that funding allocated at the national level actually reaches clinical services in local areas and does not get spent elsewhere. Specialist mental health services across the country need to know there is secure funding available, so they can recruit successfully and develop fully resourced teams to deliver the mental health care mothers, babies, children, young people and families need.

### 4

## Research and listen to the voices of young mums

Whilst some research has taken place on young mums' mental health, further research is needed to understand their specific needs. Little research has taken place to understand the maternal mental health experiences of young mums, and their experiences of accessing support, particularly from specialist services. The recent MBRRACE report also tragically highlighted a rise in teenage maternal suicides.

We believe that an in-depth review of these deaths is required in order to understand the circumstances. This will help systems at both a national and local level to learn lessons and to identify where change can be made in service provision.

**"I think key workers that work with your mental health, they should be trained on maternity and stuff. I had one that told me I wasn't mentally ill; it was because I was pregnant. I found out two weeks later I had borderline personality disorder, but he kept telling me every session I wasn't ill, I was pregnant."**

## Recommendations

We have identified 4 priority areas for future action that need to be taken forward to better support the needs of young mums:

### Listen and respond to the needs of young mums in national and local systems

- National public health bodies to update the 2016 Public Health England Framework for supporting teenage mothers and fathers, and this should include young parents up to the age of 25.
- Health and local authority commissioners should commission support pathways and holistic services to meet the individual needs of all girls and women with an agility to provide support for those with specific vulnerabilities, including young mums.
- Health and local authority commissioners to ensure that young mothers are included within their processes to listen to lived experience and co-produce services.
- Health and social care services should take a trauma-informed response when working with and supporting young parents.

### Resource and invest in universal and preventative services

- Administrations across the UK to increase the number of health visitors, school nurses, midwives and other vital public health teams to support children having the best start to life.
- Family Hubs to be established across all local authority areas and should include specific services and information for young parents.

### Ensure access to specialist mental health services

- Local health bodies should ensure that both existing specialist children and young people's mental health services and specialist perinatal mental health services receive sufficient funding and resourcing to ensure specific consideration in meeting the needs for young mums.
- National health plans to expand access to specialist mental health services should develop dedicated proposals to respond to the needs of young mums aged 25 and under.

### Research and listen to the voices of young mums

- A national campaign involving a combination of charities and public sector is required, challenging the stigma experienced by young parents.
- Health research funders such as the National Institute of Health Research should invest in research to explore what effective support for young mums can look like, based on existing services.
- Further evidence on how the relevant Government bodies in the devolved nations can support the specific needs of young mums is required.
- Following the MBRRACE report which highlighted a rise in teenage maternal suicides, an in-depth review is needed of the circumstances surrounding these deaths to understand where change can be made in service provision and to learn lessons.



## Conclusion

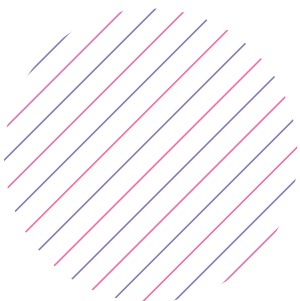
**Young mums face an increased risk of developing mental health problems. But this is not inevitable. Young mums are significantly more likely to experience shame, stigma, and judgement, which can put their mental health at risk and at the same time act as a considerable barrier to accessing support.**

The young people we spoke to told us how this stigma played out in their interactions with different professionals. They felt like their concerns about their health and their child's health were not taken seriously or that they were being judged as a parent. As one young person said to us, "It's hard enough being a mum, then being judged for being a younger mum as well."

Ultimately, young mothers tell us that they want support services that do not judge them. We heard that the most positive experiences of support were from dedicated services in a local area that catered to their needs as young mums. It is crucial to recognise the important work that these services do and ensure they are embedded within local systems of support.

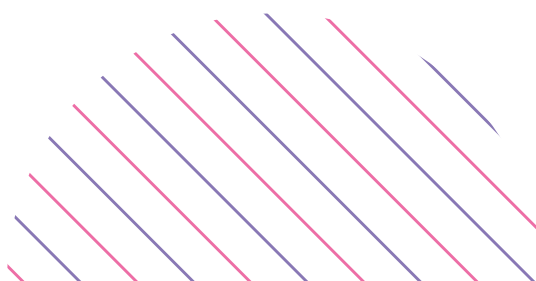
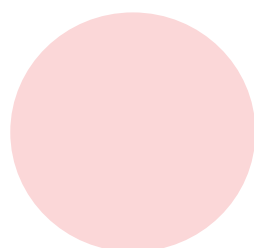
But these services cannot do it alone. Much more investment is needed across the system to increase the capacity of health care professionals and specialist services to respond appropriately to the needs of girls and young women.

For too long, young mums' needs and views have been ignored. It is time their experiences were listened to, and their needs centred in the planning of perinatal mental health support. This briefing provides an important starting point, but it is vital that we listen to their voices in order to build effective systems of support.



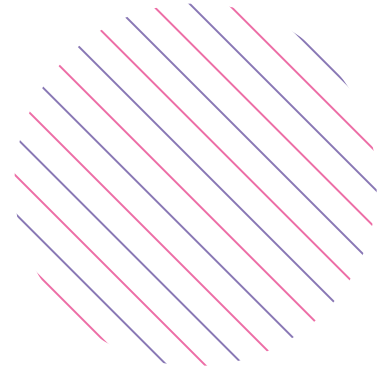
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## Children & Young People's Mental Health Coalition



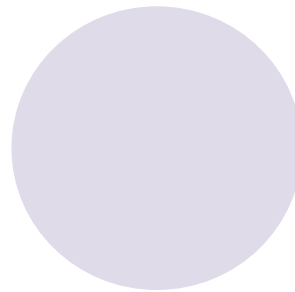
### About the The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

Our vision: For all babies, children and young people to grow up in a society that prioritises, invests, listens and attends to their mental health and wellbeing. We listen to, and learn from members, supporters, children and young people and families, using this knowledge to influence and shape policy, systems and practice.

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 @CYPMentalHealth



## Maternal Mental Health Alliance

### About the Maternal Mental Health Alliance

The Maternal Mental Health Alliance (MMHA) is a UK-wide charity and network of over 120 organisations, dedicated to ensuring women and families affected by perinatal mental health problems have access to high-quality, comprehensive perinatal mental health care. We bring the maternal mental health community together and make change happen by combining the power of real-life experience with clinical and professional expertise.

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