



The Maternal Mental Health Experiences of Young Mums

Parliamentary Briefing

October 2023

[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

Key figures and facts

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



- 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.

"As a young mum, you do feel judged a lot." – Young mum

"They tell you, not help you." - Young mums

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.

"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."

– Young mum

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.

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.

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 circumstance. 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.

What can you do to support?

- Raise the briefing and key findings in oral questions and parliamentary debates.
- Share the briefing on social media using #YoungMumsMH.
- Meet with us to discuss the key findings from the briefing and how we can support you in your work.

Questions to Government

- Will the Government commit to Family Hubs being established across all local authority areas including specific services and information for young parents?
- Will the Government commit to ensuring that local health bodies ensure that both specialist children and young people's mental health services and specialist perinatal mental health services receive sufficient funding and resourcing to expand access to support for young mums?
- Will the Government develop a national campaign to challenge the stigma experienced by young parents?

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About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of over 270 organisations dedicated to advocating for and influencing policy in relation to the mental health needs of babies, children, and young people. Our coalition consists of diverse stakeholders, including mental health organisations, youth support services, educational institutions, and concerned individuals, all united by a shared commitment to improving the well-being of children. We aim to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and ensure that children and young people have access to the necessary support and services.

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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