
Strengthening parent-infant mental health in Warwickshire

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Sophy Forman-Lynch has worked in the field of public health for 24 years in the UK, Pakistan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Bangladesh and India.

She has worked in maternal and child health, mental health and well-being, alcohol and substance misuse, offender health, sexual health and asset-based community approaches.

Sophy is currently working for the Public Health Team in Warwickshire County Council with a focus on the 'early years'. This includes involvement in the re-commissioning of health visiting services.

In 2016 Warwickshire's multi-agency strategic Smart Start Programme undertook three pieces of [research](#) to hear the voices and experiences of over of 1,030 Warwickshire parents

of children aged 0-5 years (including expectant parents), and 275 multi-agency staff working with expectant parents and young families.

Parents and workers told us that more needed to be done to promote and support parent-infant mental health and wellbeing in Warwickshire.

The experience of loneliness and social isolation amongst new parents was common, and was frequently reported to have had a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Parents talked of insufficient access to mental health support, particularly for lower-level mental health problems. There was a bigger gap in the support available to expectant and new dads.

However, parents also repeatedly talked of the fear of telling professionals that they were struggling with mental health issues, in case their infants were *'taken away'* from them. This suggests we're still not getting the narrative quite right in Warwickshire in relation to mental health and early help for parents.

There was a shared view that pregnant and perinatal parents needed 'fast-track' access to mental health support because of the potential impact on their infants' mental health, but that this was not happening consistently. There were also concerns about inadequate access to infant mental health services for children under five, and the lack of support for the 'family unit'.



Smart
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Things have moved on since 2016! Warwickshire now has a fully-embedded Perinatal Mental Health Service and a newly commissioned Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Service for children and young people from the age of 0-25 years.

However, there's still more to be done.

In May 2017 Warwickshire's public health team coordinated a large multi-agency workshop to begin mapping assets and gaps, and to articulate next steps and recommendations for improving parent-infant mental health and wellbeing in the first 1001 critical days.

Workshop delegates heard from two experts in the field of parent-infant mental health and wellbeing: Debi Maskell-Graham, author and director of Big Toes Little Toes, who spoke

about the importance of attachment and the parent-infant relationship; and Dawn Cannon, Director of Warwick University Infant and Family Wellbeing Unit, who talked of steps Warwickshire could take to strengthen parent-infant mental health support.

Recommendations from the workshop considered the whole parent-infant mental health pathway from prevention up to the highest tiers of service support. These were presented to the Coventry and Warwickshire Adult Mental Health Commissioning Group and various other Warwickshire strategic forums in June and July. As a result it was agreed that a multi-sector parent-infant mental health and wellbeing steering group would be set up to straddle Warwickshire and Coventry.

This steering group met for the first time in November and was tasked with developing a 5-year strategic plan designed to strengthen parent-infant mental health and wellbeing across Warwickshire and Coventry. Our survey using the MABIM Pathway Assessment Tool, which is currently underway, will help to shape this plan.

A call to share learning

We would welcome establishing links with other areas that are working on this agenda to hear about their experiences, and to share learning.

Our contact details

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Read more from the [Mums and Babies in Mind blog](#)

- [15.12.17 Just do it! Using the MABIM mapping tool to find gaps in services and improve women's experience](#)
- [23/11/17 Normalising paternal mental illness](#)
- [18/10/17 Supporting positive conversations about feeding choice and mental health in the perinatal period](#)
- [5/10/17 'Inspiring and full of innovative buzz' the first Maternal Mental Health Alliance Conference](#)
- [10/8/17 The role of a Liaison Psychiatrist in perinatal mental health](#)
- [2/8/17 I'm ready to thrive not just survive](#)
- [20/7/17 Priority setting in local services with use of the MABIM mapping tool](#)

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