

Outside the Box Mums' Peer Support Research



2022

outside the box



CORRA
FOUNDATION

CONTENTS

Section One: Summary 3

Section Two: Introduction 5

Section Three: What We Did..... 7

Section Four: Interpretation and Analysis 8

Informal Peer Support..... 9

Benefits of Peer Support 12

Barriers to Access 16

Gaps in Provision..... 18

Impact of COVID 19 19

Unexpected Outcomes..... 21

Section Five: Conclusion and Recommendations 22

SECTION ONE: SUMMARY

Following on from our initial work setting up mums' peer support groups in the Scottish Borders 11 years ago, we decided it was a good opportunity to follow up with some of those original mums and to talk to others about informal peer support.

We wanted to assess the impacts, short-term and longer-term, of informal peer support for mums and their children, and to find out if there were any obvious gaps. Our work revealed the following:

- Informal peer support 'happens' in different ways, but often through chance meetings, and often dependent on one or two confident people. It can be a postcode lottery.
- Peer support has to be about speaking to people who are going through the same thing at the same time.
- Less formal groups can provide a greater degree of peer support and are likely to be more sustainable. It can also happen through an informal coffee for mums following a more formal activity group. It could also happen via a virtual group.
- In some cases there is a lack of local information for mums, especially those who have just moved to an area. They end up feeling isolated or alone with a new baby, in an unknown neighbourhood. More of a joined-up approach among health and social care workers and knowledge of what's on locally could prevent this. The PEEP groups were highly praised.
- Barriers to access – for some, this was lack of awareness of what was available locally. Very informal groups are often under the radar, not advertised online. More formally organised ones are often advertised on a national level, and often cost more. They tend to be 'activity groups' for children rather than for the wellbeing of mums.
- Gaps in provision: mums identified a gap after antenatal classes, with some groups not running during the pandemic and even now, and a lack of awareness and signposting around what is available. Rural areas were reported to be especially sparse in terms of provision.
- A lack of inclusivity affected some mums, with financial, physical or language barriers.

- There was an issue identified with the short-lived nature of groups, which are often dependent on volunteers to set up and keep going. Children grow up and volunteers move on, so groups are not always sustained.
- Longer-term support was important too. Older mums told us about the benefits and impacts of ongoing peer support at different life stages – menopause, relationships, divorce, loss and dealing with older children, teens and young adults.
- The Covid situation led to new virtual groups being set up, but also isolation as health visitors stopped visiting. There were new opportunities for buggy walks and different ways to meet up safely. Covid has also led to the untimely closure of some valuable groups.

Mental health – undoubtedly, we heard that peer support is very good for mental health. Many felt this to be a taboo subject, not covered in any great degree at antenatal classes, with the result that people only sought help when they reached crisis point – needing intervention via one-to-one counselling, medication or even hospitalisation. The message coming across clearly was that informal peer support for mums could play a preventative role, providing a safe place where mums could talk to others about their emotional issues and anxieties. The stigma around discussing ‘depression’ was something people felt should be addressed, perhaps via antenatal classes but as an acceptable generally recognised topic.

Following on – we have plans to support the set-up of new peer support groups in the Borders. From what we have been hearing, it could be useful to have peer support groups not only for mums with young children, but also for mums of older children.

SECTION TWO: INTRODUCTION

Outside the Box are a charity with experience of working with diverse groups and supporting community development. We do this by supporting people in communities who may face challenges in everyday life. We empower people to build connections to enable communities to be more resilient and connected. By undertaking evaluations such as this we increase learning about how to build connected communities, which can be shared for wider benefit.

In 2011 Outside the Box obtained funding from CORRA which enabled us to facilitate the setting up of mums' peer support groups in rural areas of the Scottish Borders. Eleven years on and following the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, we took the opportunity to follow up with some of those mums about their peer support experience. We are in the unique position of being able to engage with some mums from the original informal peer support groups to evaluate the lasting impact. We also spoke more widely to other mums who were at various stages in their parenthood journey about their early peer support experiences and the longer-term impact of these.

The aims of this evaluation are to assess the effectiveness and impact of informal peer support groups for mums and their young children and to identify any gaps or improvements which could be implemented in this area.

What is peer support?

“In general, peer support has been defined by the fact that people who have like experiences can better relate and can consequently offer more authentic empathy and validation. It is also not uncommon for people with similar lived experiences to offer each other practical advice and suggestions for strategies that professionals may not offer or even know about.” (Mead & MacNeil, 2006)



The term 'peer support' can have different interpretations. Research has previously been done on formal peer support for mothers who have a diagnosis of poor mental health or who have been referred to a 'service'. Many peer support groups exist where workers or trained volunteers support mums of new babies or young children. There is value in such groups and work. However, we wanted to find out about the informal peer support mums might encounter with other mums who are experiencing the same life stage as they are. As far as we could see, this sort of support has not been researched. This informal peer support can engage mums from early stages and before they reach any sort of 'crisis point' which might entail referrals or health and social care interventions.

We hope our findings will be shared more widely to help other workers, mums' groups, and local authorities to understand how informal peer support can work for mums. Finally, sharing the findings at national level may help the Scottish Government to shape policy and practice to better support mums in the first months and years of having a baby or young child.

SECTION THREE: WHAT WE DID

Our team consisted of two staff from Outside the Box, one of whom had set up informal peer support groups for parents with twins. First of all, we set up an online survey and followed up with interviews and focus groups between June 2021 and February 2022. Around 40 people responded to our online survey and we spoke to a total of around 20 mums. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions, everything took a lot longer than planned.

We asked questions to find out about mums' experiences of informal peer support. This helped us to find out about the immediate and long-term impact of the support. It also helped identify gaps, and to find out about effects on social connections and wellbeing. Mums were also given the opportunity to give any other relevant information or comments.

The mums we spoke with ranged in age from early 20s to late 50s, some of them were recent first-time mums and at least one was looking forward to becoming a granny. We also spoke to several mums who had been part of the groups we supported in the Borders 8 years ago, to find out about lasting impacts of peer support. We spoke to people in different areas of the Scottish Borders, Central Region, Midlothian, and Ayrshire. The mums came from a range of different backgrounds.

At all times we ensured the people we were speaking to were comfortable with giving us information and that they understood how the data would be used and stored. All participants' information has been anonymised. We have named local authorities but have avoided specifics around town or village names. We have used the names of recognised groups or charities, such as NCT or PEEP. We have obtained consent from participants to tell parts of their stories and to use their quotes.

SECTION FOUR: INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

From the different data gathered, we have gained an overall view of the impact of informal peer support for mums of young children in several areas of Scotland. We begin with a case study of an informal peer support group and then follow this with specific themes:

1. Informal Peer Support
2. Benefits of Peer Support
3. Barriers to Access
4. Gaps in Provision
5. Impact of Covid-19
6. Unexpected outcomes.

The following gives a sense of the purpose, benefits, and lasting impact this group has had in the local community:

'10 years ago this group started. Many of our NHS antenatal group had started to pop and we needed to keep in touch. Days were filled with get togethers in coffee shops, hotels, Busybees, breastfeeding group, music on a Wednesday and eventually weekly lunches at each other's houses.

These women remain friends and the children's achievements and milestones provide joy for all of us who have seen them grow. The support from this group grew and with now over 400 members continues to do so.

The friends you meet from this time always hold a special place in your heart even though time can pass between seeing them. I hope during Covid some of this has still been able to happen. I would have loved to have arranged a 10-year catch up and you never know, this might still happen, it's only February!'

What is special about this group is that it does not require any form of formality, committees, staff, or organisation. It is entirely informal and voluntary, and not time consuming. Due to the digital nature of this group it can feel safer to ask advice and respond if feeling shy or nervous about speaking to someone in person.

The group monitors itself; they accept requests and ensure no spam or unhelpful comments are posted. The administrators of the group have changed over the years and the baton gets passed down to new mums joining. This not only ensures the group is current and relevant, it also gives full ownership to the mums involved.

1. INFORMAL PEER SUPPORT

It was noted during interviews that most of the informal peer support opportunities developed from attending formal structured groups, PEEP, antenatal classes and breastfeeding support.

One mum said:

'The best thing that happened though was that at the end, they prompted you to set up a WhatsApp group, and that went forward really successfully...the midwife said who wants to do this and someone said 'oh, I'll do it' so she's the admin for the group and she got it set up that evening...there wasn't much chat on it to begin with, but when the babies started arriving everyone started sharing the first photographs and you know, a little bit about the birth and the weights and heights and things like that... and that got the chat started...and that was really popular, possibly for the first – I don't know – 6 months or more?... I think it was really important, right from the time you go home from hospital, knowing there's a WhatsApp group you can message and yeah, the peer support was just amazing.'

One mum we spoke to (Scottish Borders) had not had any information about local antenatal classes, so did not feel informed about giving birth for the first time and felt she made no connections. This led or contributed to an unhappy experience, mental health issues and finally moving back to her hometown to be nearer to close family.

So much around the time of a baby's birth seems to rely on an element of chance, whether down to the geographic area or health board, the parents' circumstances, or the presence of supportive neighbours. The experience may depend on whether it is the first child, on the availability of information, or whether people are encouraged or motivated to keep in touch following antenatal classes. One mum who was expecting twins chanced upon a twins' group committee meeting in a pub: 'Nobody else understood how it felt to be growing 2 babies, I felt reassured and supported.'

She suggests a direct signpost from the midwife or antenatal class for support with expecting twins would have been extremely useful.

Another twin mum met another by chance at a local soft play café, from there they started meeting weekly until – purely by word of mouth – more mums with twins came along until they had outgrown the café!

Sometimes people unexpectedly find support in a neighbour: *'I had not long moved to the area, was working in Edinburgh until he was born 6 weeks premature, I hadn't made any friends, I went to antenatal classes but didn't finish those because he was premature – a neighbour who was due before me ended up being late – so at least I had a connection with someone else near me.'*

It was agreed by all that 'it took one person' to be confident to take the lead on coordinating a group like this. Therefore, a lot is left to chance – what if this confident person does not exist?

We heard from a few mums where there had been an informal sharing of contacts at antenatal classes. Sometimes the midwife encouraged this, sometimes another mum suggested it. Several mums said this had led to a strong group which would stay connected by social media (WhatsApp) then with physical meetups:

“Just at the end of the NHS classes, somebody said ‘Let’s set up a WhatsApp group’ and they passed around a bit of paper...so we set up a group...and we met for coffee and cake quite a lot.”

We spoke to several mums who had just moved to a new area. Often, they did not know how to find out about what was going on locally.

“I did join mother/baby groups, but people seemed to know one another, and I did not have confidence to say, “let’s go for a coffee.” I didn’t really make connections.”

One mum having moved to a new area said: *“I attended classes but there was no opportunity to make connections with other women, afterwards you didn’t get a chance to meet up, it just didn’t happen – only when she went to nursery when she was about 2 or 3 did I meet people and make friends with other mums.”*

Another mum (in a different health board area) spoke of her positive experience: *“We went to baby massage, PEEP, music group, loads – we made loads of friends, we’d see the same people 3-4 times week, so made friends. With my second child it was different, we had to be aware of nursery pickup so more to fit in, still did baby massage and PEEP, music, it was more difficult to make connections with people, as second-time mum not the same but three of us have kids the same ages and stay in touch...we lost touch a bit after p4/5 when I stopped going to the school gates, plus I’m back at work.”*



Here are some more mums' experiences:

"I really liked going to the breastfeeding group when she was really young...and I did the PEEPs sessions...I can't remember what else we did...we went to quite a few things...we quite liked the more informal things when she was really young..I feel that I went to those groups for my benefit."

"We joined groups to have a bit of structure and routine to the week...it's a nice way to work things out, when you're not working, and you've got sort of an endless amount of time to fill"

"My favourite thing was going for a cuppa afterwards; the class was about the child but the informal nature of the 'coffee shop' was for me."

2. BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT

Why mums join groups

We asked people why they joined mums' groups in our survey and again in interviews. Most mums had joined mum and baby groups 'to meet others with young children' and most said this was *'to give my child the chance to meet other young ones'*. Some joined 'to get information' and a few mentioned emotional and mental wellbeing reasons. One stated simply *'I was lonely'* while another said she had joined for *'emotional support during postnatal depression.'* This last person said she gained *'support and company at a time when I was struggling'*. One respondent said her *'anxiety was too high for joining groups.'*

Some of our interviewees expanded on some of this. Some just liked to be busy and have some motivation for getting themselves and the baby organised. One mum (who lived in the city at the time) said, *'I had to have a reason to get out the house. I made sure I had something on every day.'* A mum with prematurely born twins said of the local twins group: *'The group was my lifeline; I could meet and discuss everything with people who got me.'*

Mental wellbeing

Some women suffer with extreme disturbance to their mental wellbeing around the time of pregnancy and becoming a mum. Very sadly, a small minority of women are so adversely affected that suicide features within Maternal morbidity rates.

Many mums we spoke to reported their lack of confidence and self-esteem in the perinatal period:

'... And if not confident and vulnerable mentally, you're less likely to reach out to people...you're likely to retreat back into isolation...it shouldn't be reliant on new mums to make those connections. They need support to enable wider connections... that definitely comes with peer support which can only happen within a good community.'

'I was really lonely...no health visitor encouragement, not offered antenatal classes for any of them, never given any info whatsoever about them, probably on but not advertised, had drop-in/weekly appointments for high blood pressure...I was on high alert with this.'

What we heard was, for some mums, the right kind of peer support might be all they need to keep them feeling that things are 'okay enough.' This kind of preventative 'intervention' is where we believe informal peer support groups can play a key role.

A mum of twins said, *'In hindsight I was suffering prepartum depression but didn't know that at the time... you cannot underestimate the impact of peer emotional and practical support for new mums, at a time when your whole life is turned upside down, hormones are raging, your whole identity is different and you are learning new skills and experiencing new emotions on a daily basis; having someone who is walking the same path who understands is immeasurable.'*

Another mum described *'The treadmill of children – you lose a bit of you – it changes you psychologically, philosophically, physically.... it's interminable, tiring, you don't stop and don't notice time passing till they are suddenly grown up!'*

We spoke to mums who felt alone and unprepared for the feelings they were having, and felt the healthcare services did not understand or support them well:

'It was not a great postnatal experience, lots of stuff going on and what got me through was [my] peer group.'

'i think I probably had postnatal depression, I think looking back on it I definitely did – but at the time, you don't know...you just think that's what comes with the territory and so you're accepting of it...where in actual fact again, if I'd had input from the midwife...cos they knew the circumstances of my birth. I really think now, looking back, it was really bad that no one tried to ask if I was alright. I mean they'd come and check your scar was alright and say 'are you feeling ok?' But it was never in the context of a conversation informing you of what the signs are of stuff...because as I say I just thought, well this is just how you feel, and then, I remember the midwife saying 'oh, baby blues are quite common', so I was just like oh well, I've just got baby blues then, that's what's wrong with me...so it took like till E. was about 3 or 4, that I feel like I've actually come through it...it took all of that time.'

The above person had no close group of peers at the time of the baby's birth and told us she felt isolated and lacking information about what was on or any useful signposting for her own wellbeing.

Another mum spoke of the lack of acknowledgment around how she was feeling: *'I ended up going to the GP because I was constantly bursting into tears...I was coping fine as a mum, but there was a lot of other stuff going on in my head...and I think it just...hormones...it all got there...I told the GP I can't control my own crying, I'm fine with the baby, the baby's fine...and I was diagnosed with PND...and am still on the tablets to this day...it improved back and forward but they still didn't offer me somebody to talk to...there was no counselling, no groups...it's like the mental health bit was swept under the carpet...the little bit of taboo – yeah you're feeling baby blues, but keep your head down, you keep it hidden, kind of thing...'*

This contrasts with a positive experience in another area, where mums spoke of being able to talk to others at groups in an informal way:

'The group gave informal support around your wellbeing as a mum. It was just an informal way to speak to people as well, you could sort of drop in or drop out in terms of how much you'd want to as well...non-judgmental...'

'I needed a reason to get out the house, so groups were important for my health and wellbeing.'

The need to talk to another mum who was going through the same stages at the same time came across very strongly:

'Having a group of peers going through the same stages as me was crucial as advice changes so quickly.'

'It was great to have other people who were going through the same stage as you...'

Longer-term peer support

We heard from women about the longer-term impact of continuing with informal peer support as their children got older.

The 'twins club' is still going strong today, with a strong presence in the Borders. The recent AGM saw new mums of twins take up the reins of the group. Health visitors now signpost new twin mums to the group.

'I fell into the role informally, I believe it's sustainable because if I cannot make it someone else can jump in, we all value the group.'

A mum describes how the friendships she has made have seen them through many life events, such as children starting nursery, primary school, and more recently high school. As well as marriage breakdowns, bereavements, house moves and day to day life with twins:

'I feel privileged to have been part of the twins' club and fortunate to have had the support of these mums throughout the years, without them I'm not sure where I would be today...Being a new mum isn't easy, but having regular informal support made it much more manageable.'

We spoke to another woman who was expecting twins, with one tragically stillborn, one live. She spoke of the lasting impact of having a strong group of friends – formed with other mums in the early days, unusually, at the baby weigh-in clinic. 'There were six of us at the start, six still in touch weekly', and they are 'still solid'. They have been away on trips and holidays together and helped each other through challenges like marriages breaking down and one another's parents' funerals. 'In the early days it was about an exchange of ideas and support, we all needed support – basic baby issues or finding info. We met every Wednesday for years – for socials/holidays, weekends away.'

One mum describes a mums' social group which evolved from the baby group: *'It's still going, we have nights out - we are called the Merry Mums and we are still in touch.'*

While another described the evolution of a mums' only fitness group, starting with connections made at an informal baby and toddler group, with the social aspect being the most important part of the group.

We found that informal peer support sometimes continues 20+ years on. One mum found that when reunited with mums from the early days, even after a long gap, they could now feel comfortable giving each other support with menopause, marital breakdown, and adult children's mental health or relationship issues.

Having spoken to some mums recently at a local primary school, we were hearing that there is another vulnerable stage for mums when children think they 'no longer need them', around mid-late primary school. Mums are expected to work more, they are often adjusting to things such as relationship crises, moving to a new area, losing older relatives or having their own health issues. Many mums at this stage reported feeling 'alone' and 'disconnected'. Peer support would be equally valuable for this group.

3. BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Finding out what's on

How do new or expectant mums get information about what's on? As described above, most (but not all) will hear about NHS-run antenatal classes when they book in with health services at the start of pregnancy. This can lead to continuation of contacts – but often only if one person – the midwife or health visitor or another confident person in the group – suggests sharing contact details to stay in touch. One mum asked: *'Why do the midwives not support sharing email addresses at antenatal classes? We decided to do it ourselves, but I feel the NHS is missing a trick.'*

One mum in the Borders felt very forgotten about: *'I don't know what was going on, there was no info about groups from NHS staff – there was a weekly drop in to get the baby weighed – sitting in among 20-30 people – but nobody spoke, I felt alone and isolated, I ended up travelling to another town to a friend's with a similar aged child.'*

Still within the Scottish Borders, another mum had a different experience: *'I grew up in a Scottish Borders town and the health visitor gave me a list of groups, they were all formal rather than informal, i.e. PEEP, music group, Tiny Toes...It took some a while to get to know others.'*

'When we relocated to the Borders from the city I found it difficult to meet new mums and was not until I was pregnant with my 2nd child that I met local mums because I set up a Facebook group for the antenatal mums I met. The health visitor informally put a paper around the room for email addresses which helped.'

In another health board area (Central region) information and signposting was poor: *'We were new to the area when the baby was born. We had my mum nearby but didn't have many friends or knowledge about what was available for mums, the midwife didn't give info, there was very poor knowledge from nurses/midwife, just rubbish communication.'*

One thing emerging from the above is the difference between formal and informal groups. As reported, in many ways the informal groups often provide greater peer support and are more accessible for mums. However, these groups are often difficult to find out about – often advertised by word of mouth, not in a formal online listing or advert. This is where some of the mums' Facebook groups play a significant role – especially for newcomers to an area – assuming they manage to find the Facebook group in the first place. Health workers, even if they do want to share information with mums, may not live in the area they work in and may not have this informal knowledge about what is on locally. *'When needing advice, the mummies and babies [Facebook] page is very helpful and not judgemental, it's a great resource from other mums.'*

A few mums mentioned the online group Mumsnet, with mixed opinions: *'Unfortunately, it's full of everybody's anxieties and fears, there's a lot of judgement and misinformation there.'*

'I think some of it has its place, for example it's useful to type in something like colic and see what others say about it, in some ways I found it quite reassuring that I wasn't doing anything wrong, I might even use it now the odd time [with older children], good to know I wasn't the only one experiencing something – I wasn't alone...'

In terms of signposting to groups designed specifically to address 'mental wellbeing' issues, often there is no signposting to services, charities or befriending groups until people reach a 'crisis' stage. Although we acknowledge that some people might benefit from and require such interventions, from what we have been hearing, many mums 'get through' those tough early days with the right informal peer support.

Some mums we spoke to suggested a directory covering everything, from local, national, formal, and informal, virtual support, real-life groups and one to one support or charities dealing with specific issues – whether mental health or breastfeeding.

Physical and financial barriers

Accessibility means many things – financially, physically, inclusivity. We spoke to several mums who had moved to a more rural location from a city who shared the contrasting experience with us:

'[The local town] is well served and accessible in my opinion, but only if you can pay.'

'During Lockdown I felt very isolated, you weren't allowed to drive to the nearest town to meet people.'

Some people had concerns about the cost of groups: 'Lots of classes are on now but they cost money, and this does not work for everyone' while others thought the costs were acceptable:

'Yes, groups are accessible in terms of cost and I understand why you have to book ahead with classes...but it's quite nice having classes where you don't have to book ahead...I can remember when she was a little baby...and it's hard to know how your days going to go, isn't it? I mean, some days you want to go out and some days you don't...so this group is really handy for us.'

'We set up a WhatsApp group with parents at the new school, some of those mums could not afford baby classes and Polish mums discussed this and how they cannot afford it, so they met each other informally.'

People encountered other restrictions when they had buggies or older children:

'Local hotels and coffee shops were welcoming; however, some people have had bad experiences and this puts people off, and people can't take buggies into many places.'

'Formal classes do not allow siblings, whereas informal groups you can take all children.'

4. GAPS IN PROVISION

The postnatal gap

Many of the mums we heard from said they had attended antenatal classes, but then they experienced a 'gap' afterwards. Suddenly they felt isolated and alone with the new baby. Although the healthcare services were still on the scene, for many this felt clinical, 'about the baby' and sometimes judgmental. Those first weeks can be exhausting-physically and emotionally. Some new mums find looking after the baby is enough for them, without venturing out, whereas others crave the company of others. However, this is harder to do in rural areas, as there is not so much going on and reaching them can be a logistical challenge. Some mums had attended NCT 'Bumps and Babies' on a rota at other mums' houses, although some were put off by having to tidy their house and provide coffee for everyone. In addition, some reported feeling 'judged' if they were bottle-feeding rather than breastfeeding at a mums' and babies' group.

Short-term nature of informal groups

Informal or voluntary mums' and toddlers' groups offer a variety of advantages but can often be short-lived. Often they are reliant on the motivation, confidence and commitment of one or two mums, and when the organising mum's toddler starts nursery they move on, leaving a gap to be filled or not. Therefore this sort of group can exist in waves, with lulls in between where nobody is prepared to take on the mantle of coordinating.

Lack of outdoor-based groups

Time spent outdoors in nature, as well as improving mental and physical health, also avoids those overheated halls.

Some mums we spoke to would have liked outdoor-based groups they could attend with their young ones. They suggested things like forest school or gardening for mums and toddlers. During hall closures, some mums found a fantastic way to make connections was through 'buggy walks'. Where these didn't exist, some mums got together to set one up:

'Not so much the antenatal group because I found that kind of naturally...and especially with Lockdown, we hadn't had the chance to kind of gel together over that period. However I did come across a group on Facebook as restrictions started to ease, in summertime last year - it was a group called Scottish Buggy Walks.

I saw someone posting saying she wanted to start a group, and she started this buggy walking group, and I feel like that's become my main mums' peer support group....and so we all met last summer about July time and we've all stayed close since then, so that for me has been an absolute rock over the whole year-long period.

I think we were all just in the right time, right place...we were all clearly looking for social connection, we all had new babies in common and we all wanted to go for a walk as well...and I think there are people who would rather sit in a cafe or go to a mother and baby group, but we were all keen to go out, marching along with the buggies or the sling...so I think there was a lot of like-mindedness that brought us all together.'

Another mum shared how she found it easier to talk about personal issues 'while walking with another mum, outside...it comes more naturally somehow.'

5. IMPACT OF COVID 19

The global Covid-19 pandemic was frightening and hard to comprehend at first. Gradually it has seeped into our lives and become accepted as part of everyday reality.

Increased isolation

For those embarking on the new world of motherhood during this time, it compounded some feelings of isolation and the unknown. Many of the mums we spoke to were affected in this way.

'I do remember when there was the thick of the Lockdown and...I can't remember how old B would have been or how long it was going on for...it was last winter that I felt lowest I think, in terms of support.'

We were in that Lockdown, it was 6 weeks of snow, where I live I couldn't even get out the door with the buggy and I like to be outside so that was really hard for me... and I do remember getting a call from the health visitor, and by this point we hadn't seen each other for months and months, and I did say "Look, I am feeling a bit low, things are a bit hard and it's very demanding with the baby" and I was very much dismissed by her – I think what she said was "Oh, your identity changes when you become a mum" and I thought well of course it does, cause you know I do have a background in psychology, of course I understand that but I did feel like they didn't really want to hear it or have any capacity to give social support at that time.'

I think it is because of Lockdown and the NHS was so strained, and I understand that midwives were under a lot of pressure, but I did leave that call feeling like oh actually, I did try to reach out there and it was just kind of shut down so...I do remember coming off the call thinking, you know, I'm fine, but what if it was someone who was really in trouble? And you know, it just feels like it's a tick-box call...and you're just calling in to check that things are ok and I wasn't impressed by it.'

'...Generally I was seeing the same faces, and sharing experiences, but then B was 10 weeks old when Lockdown happened, and that just stopped all the face to face contact...and because I live very rural, we live out of town and we don't see many other people out on walks...I've only ever seen one other buggy out where I live and I was so excited I was compelled to stalk them and say "Hi, you've got a baby as well!" because I just never saw anyone, I just struck up a conversation with this lovely lady who I still know now because she is a volunteer. That was a nice kind of friendship formed but I'll never forget that I just sort of saw her and thought, "I've just got to introduce myself and speak to someone with a baby!"'

We heard that for 15 months 'there was nothing, no groups. Even formal groups are just getting back.'

Loss of venues

We heard about one group which used to be especially important for local mums: 'During lockdown, the online support has continued, however since restrictions were lifted the centre have not renewed the booking and unfortunately the toddler group has ceased. *"I feel angry and let down by the local centre. They have no idea the benefit the toddler group gave to parents and children, it's a huge miss to the town"*.

Virtual groups

Some mums spoke about informal digital peer support such as Virtual zooms, and ad hoc facetime, weekly zoom social chat, *"I was used to speaking on facetime so it was not a barrier, but I know people who were totally alone."*

'I feel lucky because he was 9 months and had an informal Facebook group set up however feel my child is shy and more withdrawn than older sibling because of lockdown restrictions.'

Someone put me in touch with a 'self-organising' antenatal group...so we've got a WhatsApp group and we've met up a couple of times...but it's not NHS...it could have been one of the midwives who suggested it...yes it's quite a wide spread, a few of them have babies already...yes, it's nice to meet people out here.

In rural areas, some people continued to make connections: *'I didn't feel isolated or disconnected during lockdown even though, we are surrounded by hills basically... but you could walk 5 minutes and see another friend who lives in another cottage... and actually that sense of community seemed even tighter than probably living in a city...so we are very lucky, I think, to have that.'*

Effects on young children

We also heard mixed reports about the effects of Lockdown on young children – for some, especially if the only child, they lost out on important socialising skills including basic interactions with peers and development of speech. In some families, it was the opposite – especially where older siblings were still at home with the schools being off. *'He had great fun with his brother and sister, and the extended family as we were in a 'bubble' with grandparents and cousins.'*

NHS support was very much at arm's length at this time:

'We had some support from the health visitor, I wouldn't say there was lots, but I don't think they could, as well...and I didn't need extra, so I don't know if people needed a bit extra if they managed to contact them and get it...I think we probably had a couple of phone calls...and we certainly saw a midwife and a health visitor however many weeks after...I mean I think they found it very...they didn't like the fact they were all in their PPE and couldn't cuddle people...I think they found it really hard...'

However, one mum did receive breastfeeding support from a charity:

'I got put in touch with breastfeeding support...they were a charity (BIBS), maybe the health visitor gave me the number...and they were really good to have...it was quite specific issues I was having with breastfeeding, and they went out of their way to help.'

6. UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

Support of an older adult/family member

Typically, people used to have family in the area they lived in. This has changed over the last generation or so, although for some it still happens to some extent:

'My dad took them to baby group...he was recuperating...he looked after the kids! I'm an only child so he only had me, so he loves the grandkids!'

For those who had some family support, several reported that it could not take the place of peer support:

'I do [have family nearby] but it's not the same as someone who is going through it right in that moment who's got a baby...cause a baby at 1 month is different from a baby at 3 months, or 6 months or 1 year...and when you've got a teeny tiny baby who's not sleeping through the night, to have someone who's in the same boat say to you "so how much sleep did you get last night?" and listen when you list all the times that you were awake and how long it took to get back to sleep...'

'You don't feel like you can talk like that with a 'normal' adult because you think "I'm just rambling on about sleep!" whereas someone who has a baby the same age as you, they get it, they're right there in the trenches with you, they know what you're talking about and they've got their own experiences to share back, yeah I just found that so valuable to be able to talk to someone who was on the same level.'

In other cases, mums felt that peer support replaced this: *'I didn't have family around, so it was important to have that sort of peer support from other mums.'* Or *'mum was around occasionally but not much support due to her age.'*

External Pressures

Another topic which came out in our interviews was the fact that often, there is an unspoken obligation on mums to be the ones who give up work and stay at home with the baby. The health advice on breastfeeding was very much around what is best for the baby, not necessarily what's best for the mum. Some noted that this put an unnecessary strain, guilt and anxiety on them, from Day 1 or even pre-conceptually. One noted the feeling that having a baby in the first place was 'expected' of them: *'You just have to do it, don't you?'*

We spoke to a number of women who had felt low when they had a sudden switch from work and career to 'being a mum' and staying at home every day with the baby. Similarly, living in a pretty rural location may become problematic when the partner is at work with the only car, or a mum is recovering post-Caesarean and can't drive-country roads are not the best to walk along with a big buggy. Many said they had to travel to the nearest town to access a group for themselves or their toddler.

SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has shown that it is undoubtedly very important to have connections with other mums who are going through the same things at that time. For many, these connections are made through formal or, more often, informal groups or settings. The support needed at these times is not a statutory or voluntary service, it is the genuine human connection and empathy of others in the same situation. This could prevent some mums getting to a crisis point with their mental wellbeing.

This report in no way attempts to undermine the importance of formal peri- and post-natal support and the hard work and dedication of the health visitors and midwives providing a crucial service. What is apparent is that the informal peer supports that women can give each other complements and supports the statutory care already in place, and that the statutory services could play a key role in signposting women on to future opportunities to connect with peers.

Top tips for mums' mental wellbeing

We have learned through interviews that the mental health and wellbeing of new mums can balance on a knife edge, and for some all that is needed is a friendly face, mutual interest and somewhere to go.

- A chat over coffee may seem like nothing much, but for some it could represent a beacon of light in a very dark week.
- If antenatal education included some tips on recognising and talking about one's own and others' mental health, the preventative value of informal peer support could be even more profound.
- Several mums we spoke to suggested more education surrounding the benefits of informal peer support opportunities, either antenatally or postnatally.
- Some mums suggested improved awareness for midwives and health visitors themselves around maternal mental health.
- Midwives and health visitors could signpost or suggest a phone numbers swap at meetings - they are best placed to encourage this as they have the captive audience.
- Local cafes, bars, hotels should be encouraged to open their doors to mums and babies. Moving a few tables out of the way so that buggies can enter and giving a smile and welcome at a time when they are usually quiet may well create a revenue stream for a long time to come.
- Peer support is for life – the benefits of peer support for all ages and stages of motherhood are obvious.

In conclusion, being pregnant, giving birth and raising a child for most is a joy and privilege, however the shift in the mums' identity, purpose, hormones, and stress levels cannot be ignored. The mental health and wellbeing of the parent has a direct link to the upbringing of the child and therefore peri- and post-natal health is in the best interests of everyone.

We would like to extend our thanks to all mums who participated in this research. We hope it gives an insight into the importance of informal peer support in our local communities.

