

## How East Lancashire improved its home birth and water birth rates

East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust last year won an award from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Maternity (APPGM) for demonstrating innovation in the area of normality of childbirth. Louise Dunn, NCT breastfeeding counsellor and chair of the MSLC, tells Kim Thomas about the Trust's success in improving home birth and water birth rates.

East Lancashire is an area with some of the worst deprivation levels in the UK, with high rates of unemployment, teenage pregnancy and infant mortality. The county suffers from a shortage of midwives, which means that staff in its two maternity units, at Royal Blackburn Hospital and Burnley General Hospital, are overworked.

The problems didn't deter the East Lancashire MSLC, however, from initiating a programme in 2006 to increase the number of home births and water births in the area. As the Trust wrote in its nomination for an APPGM award: 'Positive birth experiences hold the potential to improve public health, and enhance social capital. Where a mother experiences an empowering birth experience in the community setting...the consequences hold the potential to resonate throughout generations, through shifting beliefs and cultures.'

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The midwives themselves were keen to be part of a cultural change, says Louise Dunn, an NCT antenatal teacher and chair of the MSLC. The programme began by sending a senior midwife and a newly qualified midwife for training in water births. Other midwives attended water birth workshops, and a second pool was bought for the Burnley maternity unit. A leaflet was produced for mothers that explained the benefits of water during labour and birth, and water births were also offered to women who previously had caesarean sections.

At the same time, midwives started to encourage home births by raising it as a positive option during booking-in visits. Many felt very strongly about women's right to a home birth, says Dunn: 'Because of the lack of staff, a lot of the midwives who feel passionate about home births have had to work above and beyond what they would normally do to make it happen. They don't have to do it, but they do it because they believe in it.'

### Stress-free births

The programme was well-received by mothers, says Dunn, particularly those who had had bad birth experiences in the past: 'Some of the women have had quite technical births previously, and with this initiative they've had the opportunity to have a more normal birth. I think those women have found it a special experience. They've had a birth beforehand that wasn't what they wanted, and found that it was fine to have a birth that was more relaxed, more stress-free.'

The programme has had a major impact in a short space of time: the home birth rate in East Lancashire has doubled, going from 1.86% in 2006 to 3.22% in 2008 (the national average is 1.4%), while the water birth rates have nearly tripled from 1.7% in 2006 to 5.8% in 2008. The numbers are still small (219 homebirths and 235 waterbirths), but the trend is upwards.

### An impact on the whole community

'The interesting work has been done with home births in areas where the women wouldn't normally choose a home birth, and they think it's not for them – they think it's what middle-class women do. Having a positive birth experience can have a powerful impact on those families



in that community,' says Dunn.

A midwife quoted on the Trust's APPGM nomination form illustrates the point: 'The local community seemed to have taken their role in supporting the family unit and became involved in the whole process. One woman told me that when she was filling her birthing pool she didn't have enough water pressure and the next door neighbour, with whom she had little contact, ran an extra hose pipe from their tap, outside and into her house to fill the pool quicker! I met her on Friday in the chip shop and she was still raving about her birth (for everyone to hear while ordering their chow mein!).'

The plan now is to continue to increase the number of normal births in the area. A home birth group has been set up, and new birth centres are being built in Blackburn, Rossendale and Burnley which, when complete, will allow all women to have water births if they want. As one woman says, in a thank you letter to one of the midwives who delivered her fifth baby, 'The combination of the analgesic effect of the water and constant presence of Louise [the other midwife] and yourself, meant that I had the most relaxed, stress-free and (relatively!!) painless delivery yet.'