



Building a new perinatal mental health pathway in Bromley

By Laura James

In the early part of 2015, the urgent need for a better mental health care pathway for pregnant women in Bromley was powerfully illustrated by the testimonies of two women who felt severely let down during their pregnancies.

Gail wrote of her antenatal depression during her second pregnancy and that the specialist midwife was unable to see her for two months because she was so overstretched. Gail finally managed to access care through her GP two weeks before her due date, having suffered debilitating depression for most of her pregnancy. She wrote, *'Despite being proactive in asking at the earliest possible opportunity I did not get the support that I needed. When I think about having another child the decision is certainly influenced by the impact that it might have on my mental health care and the lack of support currently. I do not want any other woman to have to feel so alone during her pregnancy, so unsupported.'*

Similarly, Sarah told her midwife that she had a history of depression in her first antenatal appointment and was told there was a specialist midwife that she could contact if she felt she wanted extra support. She wrote, *'I didn't feel I needed this straight away, but in the last month of my pregnancy I experienced a sudden and dramatic increase in anxiety and depression. Because it came so close to my due date, I found that nobody really knew what to do with me. As I had seen so many midwives, there was nobody that had seen me throughout who could notice the change in me. I broke down in front of one midwife, who said I should get in touch with my GP. The specialist midwife I had been told about before was not available at short notice.'*

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Sarah became increasingly anxious before her son's birth. Two weeks after his birth she was admitted to hospital for three days. On return home she made a suicide attempt. She wrote, *'From that point, I was given a lot of support, but it really feels as though I had to almost lose my life before any real joined-up approach was agreed between Stepping Stones, my GP and the counselling I was then given.'*

These brave, honest and moving accounts revealed that Bromley needed an overhaul in its approach to perinatal mental health. In May 2015, I and other members of the Bromley Maternity Services Liaison Committee (MSLC) invited Gail and Sarah to submit their testimonies to the Bromley Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), which was developing a business case for a new perinatal mental health pathway in the borough. Until then, Bromley, like many other boroughs around London, had only limited perinatal mental health provision.

In April 2014, the Maternal Mental Health Alliance Everyone's Business Campaign rated CCGs across the country for their provision of perinatal services, with scores from level 0-5 and colour coding from red (0) to green (5). As indicated on the map below, Bromley scored as level 0 /red (no provision), providing further evidence in support of the case for change.^{1,2,3}

Although women requiring perinatal mental health support had access to mainstream services, such as GPs, midwives, health visiting, the NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme, and secondary care mental health services, the care was fragmented. There was a real need for 'an integrated care pathway with maternity and health visiting services so that comprehensive, co-ordinated care for women with additional mental health needs could be provided in a timely manner.'⁴

The CCG governing body reviewed Gail and Sarah's cases together with other key information, and agreed to an investment of around £270K per annum to fund an integrated, multi-disciplinary, perinatal mental health pathway.

Nicola Symes, one of the senior contract managers involved in the bid, thanked Gail and Sarah personally via the MSLC and underlined the value their stories lent to the case. *'It really does highlight the gap in our current services, and the positive impact that a new service could have for women, their children and families in the future. Their experience and stories will really add value to the business case, and emphasise in a very personal and powerful way, outcomes and issues that have been quite difficult to describe in anything other than a very generalised way.'*

The new service was made available in July 2016, provided by Oxleas Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, and is working closely with other providers such as the maternity teams at the Princess Royal University Hospital, other local mental health providers, children's centres and health visitors. The service includes a perinatal mental health clinic at the main hospital, staffed by a team including a specialist mental health midwife, consultant obstetrician, perinatal psychologist and virtual pharmacist. This specialist team aims to work closely with GPs and maternity services during pregnancy and with health visiting services for postnatal care, providing joint clinics for those women requiring high levels of support, care coordination for those considered to be at highest risk, and medicines management advice for those on psychiatric medications. Dawn Newman-Cooper, Maternity commissioner

for the CCG said, *'The benefits of our new service are wide-ranging for both women and their families. In particular, for women with a history of significant mental ill health who are considered to be at risk of relapse or recurrence of their illness associated with pregnancy and the postnatal period, and those women who become acutely unwell during pregnancy or the postnatal period.'*

Bromley MSLC is thrilled that this new pathway has been implemented and that the committee could play such an important role in its development. The MSLC will continue to liaise with the service provider and the CCG and will help to publicise the pathway when it is established. We also intend to seek out and provide ongoing feedback about the new service to maternity leaders and commissioners from the women who are accessing it.

References

1. Symes N. A meeting of NHS Bromley CCG Governing Body, 21 May 2015. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2a7TNkt> Accessed 30 May 2016
2. Maternal Mental Health Alliance Everyone's Business. UK Specialist Community Perinatal Mental Health Teams (Provision in 2015). Available from: <http://bit.ly/2aAl1vK>
3. Maternal Mental Health Alliance Everyone's Business Campaign. Evaluation briefing paper. 2016. Available from: <http://bit.ly/2ajwd2g>
4. NHS Bromley CCG. New perinatal mental health service to be provided for Bromley women, June 2015. Available from: <http://bit.ly/29RdJUD> Accessed 27 May 2016

Further resources

Royal College of General Practitioners Perinatal Mental Health toolkit

<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/clinical-and-research/toolkits/perinatal-mental-health-toolkit.aspx>