Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Newborn babies & care proceedings

Pre-birth assessment, intervention and support

Welcome to the third edition of *Newborn babies and care proceedings*, a bulletin for professionals who are involved in safeguarding babies at or close to birth.

In this issue, we are focusing on pre-birth assessment, intervention and support, and how offering early assistance to parents can potentially help to prevent care proceedings.

Many parents whose unborn children are the subject of safeguarding concerns will need the earliest possible offer of help if they are to overcome the problems that led to a referral to the local authority. They may, for example, need help for mental health issues or substance misuse, or to secure stable housing. Intervention needs to be timely – and appropriate services need to be available – for parents to be able to address concerns and demonstrate that they have made, or will be able to make, the changes needed to avoid separation. Furthermore, the timeliness of support in pregnancy is of course all the more pressing because of the 26-week statutory timescale for completion of care proceedings.

The latest Born into Care research, which examined state intervention at birth in eight local authorities and seven corresponding NHS trusts in England and Wales, from the perspective of parents and health, welfare and legal practitioners, highlights the importance of early pre-birth assessments, intervention and support, and how shortfalls in practice can lead to missed opportunities to help parents.

In the study, referrals often appeared to be driven by processes that were at odds with the swift and effective intervention needed. In addition, resource constraints and a loss of preventative services were identified. Professionals and parents expressed disappointment and frustration where insufficient priority was given to the pre-birth period in terms of both practical and therapeutic help.

In some areas of England and Wales covered by the research, a specialist pre-birth team or early help pre-birth offer had been set up, either as part of the local authority or as a specialist service. However, there was considerable variation between local authorities regarding the timing of both assessment and support in pregnancy, influenced not just by local area protocols, but also the availability of resources; these findings dovetail with previous Born into Care research.

The study led to the development of best practice draft guidelines for feasibility testing. They have set out a series of aspirational statements to guide practice, which local authorities and health trusts can adapt to their local contexts. One of these statements is focused on the parent's and their unborn child being referred quickly, with professional engagement starting early in pregnancy (in the first trimester) and including a timely offer of specialist support.

The guidelines include illustrative examples of pioneering practice in England and Wales. Some of them are referenced below, and we hope they – and the other services and initiatives highlighted in this bulletin – will inspire practitioners.

Continuing along the same theme, the next issue of *Newborn babies and care proceedings* will look at some of the models and approaches being used for support and intervention in pregnancy.

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Local authority innovations to support parents in the pre-birth period

Daisy Project, Walsall

The Daisy Project is a pre-birth and infant service offered to parents from 12 weeks gestation to up to 26 weeks post-birth. The programme works with parents to help them understand the social worker's concerns and identify their own priorities for change. Key workers use a range of psychoanalytic approaches (such as mentalisation and narrative integration) to support parents to understand their thoughts and behaviours and those of their children and others around them; to encourage parents to see the world through the eyes and experiences of their baby; and to make sense of challenging experiences in their lives and how they affect them, and the trigger points that have led them to make unsafe choices for themselves, their baby, and any other children. The parent's and professionals then come together to share understanding of the parents' underlying behaviours, identify what needs to change, and the factors that will help change occur, including mapping of the family and other support networks around the parents and child – culminating in a co-produced plan with clear milestones.

This presentation about the Daisy Project, by Service Manager Joanne Greenway, includes an interview with a mother about her experience of the project (from 5.40).

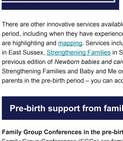
For further information about the project, please contact Joanne Greenway: Joanne.Greenway@walsall.gov.uk.

Pre-Birth Team, Together for Children Sunderland

Together for Children runs children's services in Sunderland. The pre-birth team, based on a model developed in Durham, was set up in 2018 in Sunderland and is made up of a manager, six social workers and two family support workers. They accept referrals from the earliest point in pregnancy and their structured intervention plan begins from 16 weeks, and the assessment begins at 20 weeks and runs until week 28. Intervention focuses on babies' health and development and positive pregnancy, with a specific focus on particular issues as necessary, depending on the parents' history. The team aims to work with fathers as well as mothers, offering the same interventions, separately if necessary. Families are visited once a week from week 16. Staff and parents have workbooks; this provides parents with time and support for reflection. The team has good relationships with adult services, including those for people with learning disabilities and for substance misuse, and with other services such as probation and housing.

In these two short films, **Helen Monks**, previously Strategic Service Manager but now Head of Safeguarding Services for Together for Children Sunderland, talks about the history of the model and the thinking behind it, and **Natalie Effard**, Team Manager of the Pre-Birth Team, explains the timing of the pre-birth work.

For further information, please contact Natalie Effard: natalie.effard@togetherforchildren.org.uk



Jig-So, Swansea

Jig-So is an innovative project supported by local authority and health strategic leads, and uses government funding to fund both health and local authority staff. The team is made up of midwives, nursery nurses and parenting support workers, who are co-located in the same office. Families are referred into children's social care at around 10-12 weeks with a 7-10-day short assessment identifying the work and support that is needed; this feeds into a professionals meeting by the 12-13 week point, and then a family network meeting by 14 weeks. The family network meeting helps the parents and their support network understand the worries and also what support is available to help them make safe choices in the future. The parents will often be allocated a midwife and parenting support worker by week 14, alongside their social worker to support their often complex needs.

This new process is driven by the Born into Care research and has helped all professionals to work together better from 14 weeks after conception and gives staff up to 26 weeks to work with families before their babies are born. This provides families with a better opportunity to access the right support earlier in pregnancy and facilitates better communication between all professionals and the family members to help achieve what matters to the families. Jig-So currently supports around 220 families per year, which is 8% of all births in Swansea.

In this short film, **Mike Davies**, Jig-So Coordinator, talks about the project's history and work.

For further information about Jig-So, please contact Mike Davies: Mike.Davies4@swansea.gov.uk

There are other innovative services available that support parents in the pre-birth period, including when they have experienced recurrent care proceedings, which we are highlighting and mapping. Services include COMMA in Stockport, Foundations in East Sussex, Strengthening Families in Salford and Baby and Me in Newport. The previous edition of *Newborn babies and care proceedings* included short films from Strengthening Families and Baby and Me on the approaches they use to engage parents in the pre-birth period – you can access it here.

Pre-birth support from family and friends

Family Group Conferences in the pre-birth period

Family Group Conferences (FGCs) are family led-meetings in which the family and friend network come together to make a plan for the child. They provide an important opportunity to harness support from families and friends. The Born into Care research highlighted that FGCs regarding unborn babies were happening very late in pregnancy and therefore missing an opportunity to identify and plan family-led support for parents at the earliest possible point in pregnancy. The Born into Care draft guidelines recommend FGCs being convened as early as possible in the pregnancy and for the plan to be reviewed before the baby is born.

Family Rights Group has been at the forefront of the development and introduction of FGCs in the UK. It provides accreditation for FGC services and training on FGCs and runs the network of FGC services. In March 2021, Family Rights Group held a network meeting focusing on pre-birth FGCs.

This Family Rights Group newsletter contains details of pre-birth FGC services running in Edinburgh, Kent and Newport (see pages 9-11).

Information on the Kent service can be found in this Kent County Council presentation.

For further information about FGCs in the pre-birth period, please contact SHanesnape@frg.org.uk, and for more details about the Kent service specifically contact Clare.Barton@kent.gov.uk.

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Newborn babies and care proceedings aims to support professionals who have the difficult and complex task of assessing whether a newborn baby will be at risk of significant harm if they remain in the care of their parents. Each edition will provide links to a range of resources to help professionals better face this challenging area of work and improve practice and support for families.

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