

## How does it feel for me during COVID-19?

June 2021

### Public Voices: Experiences of Pregnancy During Lockdown

From 15<sup>th</sup> June to 5<sup>th</sup> July we ran a survey to hear from people about their experiences during pregnancy and the impact the pandemic has had on them. We wanted to hear from people who were both pregnant at the time of the survey and from those who had given birth during the Covid-19 pandemic. We received 68 responses to the survey, 40 of which were from those who were pregnant for the first time during lockdown.

This report summarises the key messages that we have heard from the surveys and what other organisations and groups have shared with us.

### How changes to maternity services during lockdown had an impact

Did these changes affect how ready you felt to become a parent?		
Yes	60%	24 people
No	25%	10 people
I'm not sure	15%	6 people

We received comments from 27 respondents about what might have helped them feel more prepared for their baby's birth and life as a parent. Responses indicated that people would have liked antenatal classes, interaction with others who were expecting or in similar situations, face-to-face visits, their partner to be present at scans as well as more contact and support from healthcare professionals.

- *“Being able to see health professionals face to face. As a first time pregnancy I don't know any different, but we were left with no contact between 8 and 16 weeks, it's lonely and far from reassuring.”*
- *“More opportunities to learn about having a baby and how to prepare - zoom is fine sometimes but I think we're all a bit sick of doing things online”*
- *“It's much more helpful to learn as a group and ask questions compared to watching a video online.”*

We also received comments from 60 respondents who explained how lockdown affected them emotionally during pregnancy. For the large majority (93%), lockdown had a negative impact, with respondents stating that they felt lonely, isolated, anxious and vulnerable. Others had a more mixed response.

- *“Yes it was hard to not have family around but was nice to have time work out for ourselves our own parenting style and bond as a new family.”*

- *“I really struggled with missing out on first pregnancy things such as baby showers and scans shared with my partner. I also had to go for a growth scan on my own which was really stressful and worrying.”*
- *“I missed sharing such a special time with loved ones, I wanted to talk to people share experiences, feel surrounded by people who care and are as excited by the experience. I will have had a baby before a lot of people even know we are expecting, it feels like a missed experience and one I think I'll look back on and wish such a special time had been different.”*
- *“I wanted to meet other first time mums to be, and felt a bit isolated being pregnant during lockdown but not meeting others.”*
- *“I found it very difficult. I was pregnant with twins and my 3 older children were unable to attend school/nursery. I was exhausted all of the time and my family were unable to help due to covid restrictions. I felt total alone and overwhelmed.”*

### What people told us about the way lockdown affected the way they bonded with their baby

Did your experience of lockdown affect the way you have bonded with your baby?		
Yes	14%	9 people
No	41%	27 people
I'm not sure	18%	12 people
I haven't given birth as yet	27%	18 people

We received comments from 9 respondents who expanded on the ways lockdown affected the way they bonded with their baby. Those who responded mentioned that they struggled to bond with their baby and a lack of support to help.

- *“We weren't able to bond as a family for a while as my partner had to leave the hospital after the birth due to the restrictions, which made me feel very lonely and vulnerable and that lead to difficulty bonding with my baby.”*
- *“24 hours with your new baby and unable to get out and about to classes, meet people, get support from family made the first few months very difficult. There were no health visitors attending to ask questions, no weigh in clinics to reassure you that your baby was healthy. All this led to additional stress and postnatal anxiety which impacts on how you bond with your baby.”*
- *“I developed severe PND after the twins were born. I ultimately ended up as an inpatient at a mother and baby unit due to the lack of support or services able to help us after our twins were born.”*

## What people shared about the support they received

Did you feel that you got all the support you needed from health services during your pregnancy?

Yes	39%	26 people
No	61%	40 people

When asked what services they found helpful, 23 people responded in the following way:

- Midwife (100%)
  - GP (30%)
  - Health Visitor (26%)
  - Breastfeeding Peer Support (4%)
  - Other (4%)
  - Children's Centre Groups (0%)
- *“Midwife has been supportive. It has been hard with telephone only support to fully explore feelings but midwife was patient and understanding.”*
  - *“My midwife has been great, I couldn't get through to the MAC and I was very upset about not feeling my baby, so she got me into the GP surgery for a check-up within 2 hours, this was really reassuring.”*

## Other Support

When asked what support would have helped them, 39 people responded. Most respondents spoke about wanting face-to-face appointments and check-ups, with 4 respondents specifically mentioning weigh-ins. Many also spoke about needing more regular contact with their midwife's and healthcare professionals. In addition, 9 respondents stated how having their partners at appointments and scans would have allowed them to feel more supported. Lastly, 5 respondents spoke about requiring mental health support during their pregnancy.

- *“I would of felt more supported if I was able to have my husband with me throughout my difficult time at the hospital.”*
- *“Health visitor kept in touch via phone but to have face to face advice and reassurance that your baby was doing well. Simple things like being able to get your baby weighed on a regular basis.”*
- *“I think being offered mental health support regularly throughout my pregnancy would have been appreciated, or phone calls more frequently just to check in as part of standard care.”*
- *“NEEDED more midwife appointments face to face other than at the start then 3rd trimester. Health visitor appointments worked well. However I know of people that have not had any input from health visitors”*

- *“I was particularly upset when my partner could not attend a scan where I learned some upsetting news. There was not much support for me when being on my own in that situation.”*

We also asked if there was any support or information that people would like as we move out of lockdown. 20 respondents identified the following types of support:

- Antenatal & Postnatal Classes
  - Peer Support Groups
  - Baby Classes
  - Breastfeeding Support Groups
  - Mental Health Support
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- *“I'd like to be able to meet with other mums and babies as I'm beginning to worry about the impact the lack of interaction with others is going to have on my baby's social and speech skills.”*
  - *“A list of face to face toddler groups that are open and that don't cost a fortune. My twins are 13 months old now and have spent no time with anyone outside of our immediate family.”*
  - *“Chat with professional or peers about the trauma of the year esp with giving birth and becoming a mum.”*
  - *“More should be done to support Mother's physical and mental health post birth. 6-8 week check too focused on baby. More help with Pelvic floor and core recovery and diet and exercise pre- and post-natal.”*

### Plans around the COVID vaccine

We asked respondents what their plans were regarding the COVID-19 vaccine. Most respondents stated they had already had their first dose (42%), with many other having already been fully vaccinated (33%). Others stated they planned to get vaccinated after giving birth (10%) or in the near future (8%). However, 5% of respondents said that they would not be getting the vaccine and a further 3% stated that they were unsure.

### What have we heard from the Healthwatch Leeds enquiry line?

**We recently heard from a woman who became pregnant following fertility treatment abroad in 2020.**

She feels she didn't get much support during her pregnancy once she was back in the UK. She ended up giving birth in another part of the country at 6 months because there were not cots available in Leeds for neonatal and was then transferred to another city outside of Leeds, but baby died.

She has been physically unwell since then. She has not had any follow-up care since having the baby apart from a check-up after delivery, although she should have had a post-natal check-up and scan. She feels she has fallen through the

cracks. She managed to book a GP appointment, but the doctor never rang her. They said they did call her but she didn't answer, and now she has an appointment in 2 weeks.

She had to chase up her midwife for advice and information but struggled to get hold of her and had to ring a manager. The midwife was not helpful, saying that she was very busy and had a lot to do. The caller didn't know what to do about things like dealing with breastfeeding after her baby had died and many other practical issues. Nobody has been in touch to check on her since she came back to Leeds and she is really struggling both physically and mentally and needs some support.

**We have also heard from a woman who had struggled to connect with her community midwife.**

During her pregnancy, she had a number of phone calls with her midwife, where she was assured that all seemed well. However, she had recently spoken to a friend who had been diagnosed with gestational diabetes at 25 weeks so she questioned the midwife about doing a test for this. Only because of her requesting it a test was done and she was diagnosed with gestational diabetes. She feels that as a result of the appointments not being face-to-face things were missed that could have been picked up earlier. She never saw or spoke to the same midwife and wasn't able to build a relationship with them.

She feels the care at the hospital has been good but not the care from the community midwife team. The checklist and testing in her maternity pack has not been followed and there has been a lack of consistency. She feels that she may have post-natal depression but does not know who to turn to or where to go, and she doesn't feel confident to go to her midwife or health visitor as she has no relationship with them.

**What have third-sector organisations observed?  
Interview with Home Start**

A huge thank you to the team at Home-Start Leeds for sharing their observations with us.

**About Home-Start Leeds**

[Home-Start](#) is a local community network of trained volunteers and expert support helping families with young children through their challenging times.

**How did lockdown affect your service users emotionally while they were pregnant or expecting a new baby in the family?**

“The families that we have supported during lockdown from pregnancy through to the birth have mainly struggled with feelings of isolation and anxiety. Parents have expressed worries around the birth and concerns that dad could only attend hospital during active labour. This increased anxiety around uncertainty and fathers missing the birth. Pregnancy scans have also been a cause of anxiety with dads being unable to attend and support mum.”

How were your service users affected by changes to maternity services during lockdown? What impact did it have on them when face-to-face services were restricted?

“As above, parents were affected by dad being unable to attend scans/appointments and only during active labour. The hours after the birth are important for skin-to-skin contact with mum and dad and a few families felt dad missed out on this. Children’s Centres and baby groups are often an important part of routine for new mums, and some struggled with being at home alone with baby. One family expressed their frustration at trying to get hold of their midwife or GP and not seeing a Health Visitor at all during the first few months after birth. Mums felt less able to voice their concerns and one mum expressed feeling guilty for taking up their time.”

How did your service users feel once their baby was born? For example, did their pregnancy experiences affect how they bonded with their baby?

“Some mums within our service were diagnosed with Post-Natal Depression and were referred for counselling within the Leeds Mental Wellbeing Service. This worked quite well for some mums as it was more accessible for some due to it being virtual and fit around routine. Concerns during pregnancy around giving birth in hospital and the worry of catching covid were prominent in pregnant women. One mum was diagnosed with OCD as she was overly concerned with baby catching covid. The constant worry did affect their mental health during pregnancy and impacted their enjoyment once baby was born. One dad worried that not spending time with baby in the hospital after the birth would affect their bond.”

What practical support would service users benefit from as we come out of lockdown?

“Some GP practices have really limited their face-to-face contact with patients and parents have expressed difficulties in making an appointment for themselves and baby. Post-natal checks on mums have been limited and more thorough check-ins on their mental health now that restrictions are lifting would be beneficial as would direction to other suitable services. Time and nurturing of new mums and dads have understandably been limited too, however continuity with professionals in the perinatal period benefits the families we support, and they are more likely to engage.”

What emotional support would your service users benefit from?

“The families that we support benefit from any emotional support that enables them to build a trusting relationship. For some families, peer support would be beneficial to share experiences of having a baby through lockdown, for others, especially those with perinatal mental health difficulties, having emotional support through counselling would be beneficial. Some families voiced that having the same health visitor and continuity of care would improve their confidence in looking after baby and they would feel more able to ask for help.”

What would you as an organisation like to see maternity or family services do differently from now on to support new parents post-lockdown?

“As an organisation we would like to see maternity/family services be more inclusive of fathers post-lockdown as it is well researched that a father’s

wellbeing can impact on both the mother and baby. Fathers have felt particularly excluded during lockdown as they have been physically excluded from scans/appointments and post-labour. Checking in on dad as well as mum may encourage them to seek support if they are also struggling.”

### Positive Experiences of Maternity Services During Lockdown

Over the past year, we have also heard about women’s positive experiences of accessing pregnancy and maternity support. Here are some examples.

“I accessed the maternity services last year for my second child and this was fantastic. All the staff involved were supportive of my decision to birth at home and I felt the service was at a much higher level than I received at another practice with my first child.”

Patient at Westgate Surgery, Otley

“I had my baby here shortly after having moved to Leeds. The care and support was splendid. Decision was taken promptly to take me to theatre when I wasn’t progressing well. Theatre team were amazing. 100 stars for maternity. Thank you.”

Patient at St James's University Hospital

“I attended BPAS Leeds knowing I was pregnant but not how far how along, knowing it was well before lockdown commenced. I was extremely scared I would be too far gone to receive termination treatment. I rang and was scared, nervous and anxious to be seen. A wonderful woman who was a nurse giving me my over-the-phone medical consultation said if I could get to Leeds the day after the phone call she would be the one seeing me and we could get through this together, immediately I accepted and felt huge relief I was going to be seen by someone so understanding and kind!

3 nurses tended to me on the first appointment and were so so kind, they held my hand and kept talking to me and just made me feel like it was going to be okay. [The nurse who ultimately booked my treatment] was so relaxed and comforting and I felt no sort of judgement from any of these women which is something I think many women are anxious about! I wish I could name them and thank them personally.

The reception staff were also lovely, very welcoming and bubbly which is always nice to experience. All my treatment was amazing and has been completely successful. Thank you everyone who helped me when I attended Leeds BPAS, it made the apprehension of everything else so much less and I'm so grateful for your kindness.”

Patient at BPAS Leeds