

Planning for Parenthood:

A review of preconception Health needs in Luton



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Introduction

This document presents a comprehensive evaluation of preconception health services available to women in Luton, conducted by Healthwatch Luton in collaboration with Integrated Care Systems across Bedfordshire, Central Bedfordshire, Luton, and Milton Keynes.

The evaluation explores current service provisions, identifies key challenges faced by diverse and often underrepresented groups, and presents community-driven recommendations aimed at enhancing support structures and improving health outcomes for women, their babies, and families.

The evaluation was conducted through extensive community engagement activities, including targeted focus groups, surveys, and participation in local events. Special emphasis was placed on capturing the experiences of young women and ethnic minority groups, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to effective preconception care.

Findings highlight the necessity for culturally competent and easily accessible healthcare information, with specific attention required for managing conditions such as diabetes, which significantly impact pregnancy outcomes in the local population.

This report outlines practical recommendations for service improvements and community engagement strategies to facilitate better health outcomes and informed decision-making in preconception care.

Methodology

To evaluate preconception support services in Luton, Healthwatch Luton employed a mixed-methods approach centred on community engagement, with a particular emphasis on hearing from underrepresented groups. The aim was to gain a nuanced understanding of public awareness, accessibility, and experiences of preconception care.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held at Luton Sixth Form College with female students aged 16–19, alongside a third group with female staff members. These sessions utilised Tommy's Toolkit to facilitate discussions around planning a healthy pregnancy, lifestyle considerations, and access to information and support.



Health Promotion Events

Two community-based events were delivered in collaboration with local health professionals and partner organisations. Held at Hockwell Ring Community Hub and Bury Park Community Centre, these events focused on healthy pregnancy planning, diabetes awareness, and the use of decision-making tools and educational materials such as Tommy's Planning for Pregnancy tool.

Partnership Working

The project was delivered in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders, including Maternity Voices Partnership (MVP), Tommy's, Diabetes UK, and Bedfordshire Hospitals. Their contributions included co-delivery of events, provision of expert advice, and dissemination of educational resources.



Surveys and Questionnaires

Standardised questionnaires were distributed during events and focus groups to capture quantitative data on women's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours regarding preconception health. These tools also helped to identify gaps in information and preferred sources of support.

Community Events

Healthwatch Luton attended local events such as *Picnic in the Park*, directly engaging with 42 women from diverse ethnic backgrounds to gather insights into their preconception experiences. Discussions were complemented by structured questionnaires.



The methodology aimed to ensure inclusivity and representation, particularly among women from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Black African backgrounds—groups often underrepresented in health feedback. Translation needs and cultural sensitivities were considered throughout.

Key Themes and Findings

Summary of Perspectives

Women across Luton shared a wide range of experiences, concerns, and expectations in relation to preconception health. These perspectives reflect both shared priorities and unique challenges shaped by culture, age, and personal circumstance.

Young Women



Many younger participants, especially those aged 16–19, expressed limited awareness of preconception health practices but a strong interest in learning more. They valued culturally sensitive advice and wanted clearer information about healthy diets, supplements, and BMI. Several lacked understanding about when and how to book antenatal appointments and were surprised to learn about the role of folic acid or vitamin D.



“I’d like advice on what to eat before I get pregnant, especially food that fits with my culture.”
(Young woman, college focus group)

“I never knew folic acid should be taken before pregnancy—this should be told to us earlier.” *(Student, Sixth Form focus group)*
Mothers with Prior Experience”



Women who had already had children often felt more confident about their preconception needs but still wanted better access to information and support groups. Some emphasised how knowledge gained from a previous pregnancy shaped their decisions in planning another, including supplement use and GP contact.

Women from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds

Participants from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and African heritage highlighted the need for advice that is relevant to their cultural diets and lifestyles. Many shared concerns that leaflets and health advice were only available in English, creating barriers for older family members. Trust in professionals was evident, but accessibility remained a concern.



There should be a group in my community, just for women, where we can get advice and support each other.”
(Woman at Picnic in the Park event)

“My mum can’t read English. None of the leaflets help her.”
(Student participant, speaking on behalf of family needs)



Summary of Perspectives

Women with underlying health conditions



Those managing conditions such as diabetes or asthma voiced the need for tailored advice, especially regarding medication during pregnancy. Some had already spoken to healthcare professionals, while others felt unsure about how their condition might affect fertility or pregnancy outcomes.

Views on Service Access and Delivery

Across groups, there was a shared frustration with GP access—both in terms of booking appointments and navigating online systems. Participants favoured in-person engagement and recommended more community-based initiatives, led by women, to provide support in a welcoming and trusted environment.



“It was really helpful having professionals talk to us in a relaxed environment.”

(Participant, Healthy Mother, Healthy Pregnancy event)



Key things we heard: Picnic in the Park



33%

of those consulted reported stopping contraceptive use 3 months before trying to conceive.

21%

of women said they needed more advice on how to be healthy before pregnancy.

55%

stated they had never used contraception

These perspectives underscore the need for personalised, accessible, and culturally competent preconception support across Luton.

Summary of Key Findings

The evaluation identified several critical themes affecting women's access to and experiences of preconception care in Luton:

Key things we uncovered:

High Demand for Preconception Support

97% of participants expressed a desire for guidance on exercise, diet, mental health, and supplements when planning a pregnancy, with GPs cited as the preferred source of support.

Barriers to accessing services

Many women reported difficulties securing GP appointments, limited awareness of available resources, and language or cultural barriers—particularly among ethnic minority groups.

Cultural and Community Considerations

Women from Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Black African backgrounds emphasised the importance of culturally relevant dietary advice and healthcare information. A lack of translated materials was a recurring concern.

Concerns around Diabetes

There was significant concern regarding diabetes, particularly gestational and type 2. Participants expressed a need for more information about prevention, management, and the links between diabetes and pregnancy.

Desire for Local, Peer-led-support

Many participants, especially young women and mothers, expressed interest in attending local women's health or family planning groups led by female staff. These would provide accessible, informal settings for support and information-sharing.

Health Literacy and Education Gaps

While some women had prior knowledge from previous pregnancies, others—particularly younger women—lacked understanding of antenatal timelines, healthy weight management, and the role of supplements like folic acid.

Positive impact of Health Events

Community events and focus groups were well received, with participants praising the friendly environment, informative content, and opportunities to engage directly with professionals.

Recommendations

Improve Accessibility to GP Services

Simplify appointment systems and promote awareness of online triage tools. Ensure that GPs and practice staff are equipped to support preconception conversations early and effectively..

Expand Community-Based Women's Health Programmes

Establish local, peer-led women's health and preconception groups, ideally staffed by female professionals, to provide safe spaces for learning, discussion, and support.

Enhance cultural and Linguistic Accessibility

Translate key resources (leaflets, dietary advice, supplement guidance) into multiple languages relevant to Luton's diverse population. Develop culturally tailored health promotion materials.

Strengthen Preconception Education in Schools and Colleges

Integrate preconception topics into PSHE or health education, using resources like Tommy's Toolkit. Engage young women early to build knowledge and confidence.

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Promote the Use of Preconception Planning Tools

Encourage the use of NHS and Tommy's online resources, including the Planning for Pregnancy tool, through GP surgeries, pharmacies, and community events.

Support Women with Long-Term Health Conditions

Ensure women with underlying health issues are supported to understand the implications of their condition on future pregnancies and receive appropriate care planning.

Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that preconception health is a significant and valued concern for women across Luton, with a clear demand for accessible, timely, and culturally appropriate support. The findings reveal that while many women are motivated to adopt healthy behaviours before pregnancy, they often encounter systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing the support they need.

Key challenges include difficulties in securing GP appointments, limited awareness of reliable health resources, and a lack of tailored guidance that reflects cultural and linguistic needs. Additionally, the impact of long-term conditions such as diabetes underscores the importance of early intervention and personalised care planning.

Engagement with a broad cross-section of the community—particularly young women, ethnic minority groups, and those with lived experience—has provided valuable insight into how services can be reshaped to better meet women's needs. Participants expressed a strong preference for localised, women-led initiatives, underpinned by trusted relationships with healthcare professionals.

To move forward, a collaborative, community-driven approach is essential. By prioritising inclusivity, health literacy, and service accessibility, stakeholders across the health and care system can work together to ensure all women in Luton are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and support necessary for a healthy pregnancy journey.

About Healthwatch

Healthwatch Luton is the local champion for people using health and social care services across Luton. We promote choice and influence the provision of high-quality health, social care, and wellbeing services for all in our community.

Healthwatch Luton (HWL) has significant statutory powers to ensure that the voices of local people are heard and acted upon by those who commission, deliver, and regulate health and care services. HWL engages with all parts of Luton's diverse population to ensure that a broad range of experiences and views are considered, understood, and reflected in decisions about care. Our work is rooted in strong community connections and grounded in the real-life experiences of the people we serve.

Healthwatch Luton is part of the wider Healthwatch network across England, one of three local Healthwatch organisations in Bedfordshire. We belong to a national network supported by Healthwatch England, which provides guidance and oversight to ensure local Healthwatch work consistently and effectively in each of the 152 local authority areas in England.

As the only independent body focused entirely on people's experiences of health and social care, our role is to make sure that these services—and the decisions surrounding them—are shaped by the people who use them. At Healthwatch Luton, we believe that everyone's voice matters and should be at the heart of care.