

# ULVERSTON MIND 'CONNECTING MUMS' PROJECT:

Making a positive impact on the lives of women  
experiencing post-natal depression in South Lakeland  
& Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria



"The support I have received from Mind during and after my pregnancy was a huge contributing factor to me getting well again."

"For me, Mind were a godsend. I can't describe the relief I felt after just one session of pouring my heart out."

"I generally feel more positive about life these days. The specific support has been amazing."

An external review of impact and achievement

March 2015



[www.egconsulting.co.uk](http://www.egconsulting.co.uk)

## What is Ulverton Mind?

Founded in 1988, Ulverston Mind provides support to people experiencing a problem which affects, or is affected by, their mental health. The charity aims to promote good mental health in its area of benefit and works to combat stigma and discrimination in relation to mental health issues. With a small paid staff team, complemented by volunteers including an active Trustee Board, the charity provides in terms of direct service provision:

- One-to-one individual emotional and practical support in the form of advice and information, practical help, befriending, and a listening ear (800 benefitted from this support last year) to improve their resilience, help them manage their mental health more effectively, and move towards recovery
- Peer support and social contact through daily drop-ins (including men-only and women-only sessions) – there were a further 78 beneficiaries of this service in 2014
- Therapeutic activities, wherever possible in local community facilities, such as creative writing, walking, cooking and art
- Open-access person-centred counselling service run by seven professionally-trained and accredited volunteer counsellors (there were 60 users of this service in 2014, with an average number of 10 sessions per client)
- Bespoke support service for mothers experiencing mental health challenges, called **‘Connecting Mums’**, which is subject to this review.

The charity takes every opportunity to raise the profile of mental illness, to inform the public about ways of protecting and promoting their mental health, to fight for better services, and to counter stereotypes of mental illness. The charity has an annual income of just under £80,000. **‘Connecting Mums’** is a project designed to increase the emotional resilience of mothers who are at risk or suffering from Ante and Post Natal Depression.

[www.ulverstonmind.org.uk](http://www.ulverstonmind.org.uk)

## What is eg: consulting?

Founded in 2006 and based in Bury St. Edmunds **eg: consulting** is an advisory, development, evaluation and fundraising consultancy targeted at medium sized voluntary and community sector organisations; and public sector agencies. In nine years the consultancy (in combination with Community Interest Company **Big Society Funding**) has worked with 74 VCSE, local authority, public agency clients, including assessing their positive impact and thus helping them to meet their organisational aspirations for growth and development.

[www.egconsulting.co.uk](http://www.egconsulting.co.uk)

Twitter: @markereiraguyer

[www.bigsocietyfunding.org](http://www.bigsocietyfunding.org)

Twitter: @BigSocietyCIC

## Views of those using 'Connecting Mums' services

***“ My health visitor put me in touch with Mind. The weekly counselling sessions really helped me to understand why I was feeling that way and what I could do to help myself. ”***

***“ For me, Mind were a godsend. I can't describe the relief I felt after just one session of pouring my heart out. There is no judgement, just help and support, and thanks to them I now live a much happier life, enjoying the precious time I get with my husband and children....”***

***“ I wasn't copying well. Karen let me talk and talk and cry and cry, but didn't let me beat myself up – she is strong yet sympathetic at the same time – which is what I needed. Someone to be understanding but positive; to tell me that there was a way through and a way to help me to the other side of my depression. ”***

***“ I got a lot of advice and support, which really made a difference to getting better.”***

***“ My daughter is now 15 months old and my son is four years old. I feel better than I have done in many years. I feel capable, positive and most importantly I know that I am a good mum. I have just started helping out at the groups as a volunteer and I am really enjoying it..”***

***“ Through talking, Karen has shown me that I am valued and important. I am learning to look after myself and my mental health and to move myself up my priority list (I wasn't even on my priority list when I first met Karen!).”***



## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

### What led to the development of the ‘Connecting Mums’ project and what needs have been identified?

1 National Research shows that Post-Natal Depression affects one in 10 mothers and can cause severe emotional distress, loss of self-esteem, feelings of shame and inadequacy, anxiety, extreme fatigue and many other physical symptoms. It can have long-term consequences for the mother-child bond and for other family relationships. Women are often reluctant to admit their depression for fear of being seen as inadequate mothers, or even of having their children taken off them.

Ulverston Mind recognized these needs locally and resolved to establish bespoke project services designed to help increase the emotional resilience of local mothers – in the south Lakeland and Barrow-in-Furness localities - who were at risk or suffering from Ante and Post Natal Depression (PND). Subsequently, the project was entitled ‘Connecting Mums’ (the name was chosen by the mothers themselves) to emotionally support them throughout their illness and into recovery.

According to the project manager the emphasis of the project is on peer support: *“All available evidence has previously demonstrated that when help and support is provided by mothers themselves - who have experienced PND- it is perceived as less threatening initially than professional intervention. Post Natal Depression affects whole families, babies, siblings, partners supporting women through their illness helps to maintain good levels of attachment with their babies and children thus preventing attachment disorders which very often lead to mental health issues in adulthood. By supporting the whole family it reduces the likelihood of relationships breaking down meaning more children are growing in a stable family home.”*

**“ The initial support provided through home visits was invaluable in knowing that there was something out there who cared and was accessible through visits, texts and phone calls. This was a turning point, not only for me but also for my husband and our child. “**

### How has ‘Connecting Mums’ progressed?

2 Currently the ‘Connecting Mums’ offers three weekly peer support group sessions, held primarily in the Children’s Centres, of Barrow, Dalton and Ulverston. As touched on above these groups are ‘run by Mums for Mums’ and facilitated by volunteers who have themselves had some experience of PND. Volunteers have also undergone Ulverston Mind’s volunteer induction process and given further training in Equality and Diversity, listening skills and wherever possible Suicide Intervention Training. A support worker whose task it is to introduce mothers to the group and the other mothers in attendance, and to ensure the smooth running of the group sessions and activities oversees each group.

Furthermore the support worker and the Manager conduct initial home visits. ‘Connecting Mums’ acknowledges that many new mothers attending the group sessions can be feeling extremely vulnerable and often struggle to get out of the house, and actually along to the peer support session. By offering home visits the project team are able to assess their individual needs, refer on or back to the health visitors where necessary, and gently introduce the idea of group support. Mothers can often find the thought of attending a group too much initially which is why the home visits prove invaluable - being able to maintain contact and gain support from the service whilst they are at their most vulnerable. The ‘Connecting Mums’ project provides mothers with a vital direct access to Ulverston Mind’s counselling service, which is a professional affordable service delivered by 8 fully qualified person-centred counsellors.

Group sessions are timetabled to co-incide with Health Visitor clinics which are also held at the Children's Centres. The project staff report having excellent working relationships with local Health Visitors and gaining most of their referrals from this source. However, as the project has progressed and developed as well as statutory health referrals, an increasing number of former or present service beneficiaries are signposting friends/family who they believe will also benefit in the same way that they have. From information provided by Ulverston Mind in the first two years of the '*Connecting Mums*' project 136 mothers have benefitted, far exceeding internal targets set of approximately 60-70 mothers. We learn that local Health Visiting teams based in Ulverston, Dalton or Barrow have referred 97 mothers supported. From July 2013 the team report a further 55 new referrals equating to just over one new referral per week. Almost half of this number (21) are working either full or part time.

3 The charity has placed great emphasis on ensuring that it captures and measures progress and impact on the lives of mothers and their families. To date, the '*Connecting Mums*' project has been evaluated by two different methods according to the demands of different funders. Ulverston Mind has used WEMWEBS (Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale) and also in association with the People Health Trust, the University of Chester have been conducted limited research using internally produced evaluation. Thus far these have both proved useful to demonstrating the value and needs of '*Connecting Mums*'. The Consultant has had sight of this report.

4 The Consultant in line with the review brief has concentrated on examining the '*Connecting Mums*' service delivery and activity in recent years, and how positive impacts for individual mothers (and their families) are effectively achieved. Clearly, any examination of the work undertaken by the '*Connecting Mums*' team then synergises with Ulverston Mind's other key cornerstone activities and services primarily based from their offices in Ulverston itself. Furthermore, this review ties closely in with the charity's Stage Two Reaching Communities application form, whereby the Big Lottery Fund stipulates that an open and honest assessment of what the existing service delivery model has achieved and the changes originally envisioned brought about, then be submitted as part of the formal application process.

5 At this juncture it is important to highlight the significant challenges Ulverston Mind – and hence the '*Connecting Mums*' project - faces, and that this is especially relevant in light of nearly all its modest income coming from the statutory sector. Severe retrenchment of public finances, leading to deep cuts, means the operating climate for the VCSE (Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise) sector in Cumbria (and elsewhere) has become progressively more challenging. This is anticipated to become even more draconian at the local level with more cuts programmed. In the last five years local government budgets have been reduced by 40% with a consequently deleterious impact on the VCSE sector. This puts huge pressures on service delivery and undermines staff morale and motivation with the sector generally. Ulverston Mind has operated within a tough financial climate for several years and it is noteworthy how resilient the organisation – and key managers and staff – remain. All this despite low salaries and uncertain futures. However, the delivery of partnership, networking and frontline service delivery activities are significantly hampered by this paucity of funding and the diminishing architecture of support from funders, the NHS and malaise that ongoing austerity engenders. The consultant is mindful of this context when examining the '*Connecting Mums*' work activities in the last year.

Whilst the project has received Peoples Health Trust funding up to June 2014, since then the charity has been using reserves to ensure its continuation and has previously attracted funds from the local County Council. Furthermore it is noteworthy that the service has done well until this point to secure funding from Cumbria County Council's Mental Health Prevention Fund, and as the manager's report the project was one of only two (out of a total of 44 projects) to receive continuation funding for an additional six month period on the strength of project achievement and success.

## REVIEW REMIT

6 In the context of future charity fundraising, and a Stage Two submission to the Big Lottery Fund's Reaching Communities grant programme, the consultancy was required:

- To review and evaluate the achievement and success of the '*Connecting Mums*' service and project work activities during the last period of time (e.g. 2013 -14) to demonstrate the extent it has achieved stated objectives and especially positive outcomes and impact on the lives of mothers experiencing post-natal depression (PND) and their families living in South Lakeland and Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria.

Definitive and in-depth evaluation on a tight budget is not possible, and therefore, this brief review and evaluation seeks to establish progress and impact at the conclusion of yet another year's full operation by the '*Connecting Mums*' project. It is understood that this review will assist in the process of identifying the need and support for an enhanced service delivery model going forward, possibly scaling up provision, and help in the collaborative co-production of further support to vulnerable mothers which further underpin Ulverston Mind's organisational mission statement and future service planning.

In undertaking the review of '*Connecting Mums*' the Consultant has adopted the following methodology:

- Examining and analysing: the internally collated data and monitoring information and yearly reports to identify achievement of outcomes; staff reports and other staff/manager observations; five individual Case Studies; the views of external health provider stakeholders; and through the facilitation of a specially convened Focus Group comprising nine beneficiaries and a further manager, staff and volunteer Focus Group meeting; all aimed at securing their views on project achievements and successful outcomes.

***"I had a feeling of desperation, as if there was no light at the end of the tunnel and that life was never going to get any better."***

## REVIEW FINDINGS – ACHIEVEMENTS & IMPACT

7 In order to analyse, review and assess the impact of the '*Connecting Mums*' project and service activities on individual beneficiaries in the last year, the Consultant has been provided with internally collated data, monitoring information, annual charity reports (both 2012/13 and 2013/14) and feedback survey summaries and externally commissioned reports – all designed to help identify benefits and consequently overall achievement of outputs and outcomes.

In this context, the following sections seek to provide a brief overview of how the services provided have impacted on the lives of mothers experiencing PND and their families, and also observations alongside concomitant assessments as to how the project has contributed in an impactful way on their lives – many of who are facing significant social disadvantage and residing in some of the poorest communities of the North-West. Furthermore, the Consultant has considered how the project aims empower mothers by encouraging them to take more control of their own health and wellbeing. This flows from the case studying and also a focus group meeting held in mid February 2015, and facilitated by a trained and experienced psychotherapist.

Feedback is also provided from external stakeholders and partners, primarily from the NHS, health visitors, the local MP and Mind in Furness.

In sections 9 -10 below the consultant as a core ingredient to this review has sought to capture the voices of individual beneficiaries themselves and their perceptions of benefits.

8 The charity managers are clear about how much they believe has been achieved since the 'Connecting Mums' project started in 2010, and refer internally to the project services providing vital preventative support and 'from very small beginnings [developing] into a thriving project'. They have provided the Consultant with monitoring and evaluative materials to substantiate this organisational view. Clearly, the numbers of women supported is significantly more than originally anticipated and is a great credit to the charity with limited financial and staff resources. There are almost 200 beneficiaries over the period of review. Whilst there are some 200 individual direct beneficiaries (the improved mental health and wellbeing of new mothers), one could also calculate the numbers of indirect beneficiaries as being three to four times this number – dependent upon family size

To date, in order to evaluate their existing 'Connecting Mums' work they have routinely used WEMWEBS (Warwick & Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale) and collaborated in a major University research programme involving Minds elsewhere and their individual resilience projects. The subsequent report: *Evaluation of local Mind resilience programme* (July 2014), combined with several discussions with the project team, we can identify the major learning points arising from the project for pregnant women and new mothers thus far:

- It has demonstrated ways to promote confidence and self-esteem, and allowed for social connecting and networking;
- It has facilitated empowerment of women, a process which also promotes wellbeing and better health; and very importantly supported women to nurture self;
- The team delivery approach was deemed as a strength; allied to effective group work and efficacious individual support led by sympathetic and understanding staff/volunteers;
- Beneficiaries became advocates as project volunteers, leading to more tailored service development and ethos of reciprocal co-production;
- Immense challenges exist of both rural outreach (compounded by endemic social isolation) and within highly vulnerable and socially deprived urban communities – particularly in Barrow;
- Even better links with maternity services were seen as important to improve the service for pregnant women.

Whilst the information collated internally is adequate for monitoring purposes, and reasonable assessments and judgments on efficacy can be reached (which is often supplemented by the firm views of managers, project staff and Trustee perspectives on achievements and success), the Consultant is not convinced that individual beneficiary information, designed to demonstrate impact, is being collated thoroughly enough and requires additional diligence and application going forward. This could include individual data on social circumstances of beneficiaries including income, age profiles, ethnicity and family composition.

**"Hand on heart I would not be here if it wasn't for Connecting Mums. It's been a life saver."**  
**"Karen will come to my house and talk if I can't bring myself to come to the group."**

### **Prespectives, views & comments from individual Beneficiaries**

9 Consultant findings demonstrate that significant achievements have been secured in individual's perceptions of positive outcomes for themselves and subsequently their babies, children and families. This has been evidenced by contributions directly made by beneficiaries in a Focus Group held in February 2015 and facilitated by the consultancy and from individual case studies. The discussions with beneficiaries are summarised by the facilitator in Appendix 1.

What we learn from the Focus Group is that:

- Many women had received significant and on-going support from the '*Connecting Mums*' project, and rated it superior to that received elsewhere within the NHS, and often as 'life-saving' and enabling them to overcome their PND
- The role of the project manager, Karen Gambie, and the trained volunteers (who also had first-hand experience of PND) was exemplary and personalised; and their interventions, including 'coaxing' along and constant monitoring, had led to a range of positive other benefits and impact. The following is a standout quote from a beneficiary: "The impact of Connecting Mums has been immense – Karen has helped us as a whole family."
- Counselling provided by the project was reported by beneficiaries to be 'enormously helpful', 'life-changing' and 'life preserving' and leading to the improvement of confidence levels, ability to cope as a new mother and helping to build family relationships.

As part of the evaluative exercise the seven focus group participants were encouraged to complete simple feedback forms to inform the consultant about how they felt about the support they had received:

- All respondents identified that they had benefitted considerably, and that from feeling prior to accessing '*Connecting Mums*' they had felt either completely unsupported or hardly supported at all, they now felt very supported.
- Five mothers scored the project 10 out of 10 for how supported they now felt, with the other two scoring it at a very high 9 out of 10.
- Overwhelmingly mothers felt very isolated before coming in to contact with the project, and having accessed it they all reported either not being isolated at all, or feeling a lot less isolated. A staggering turnaround.
- Mothers reported increased confidence as a mother and parent, and vastly improved emotional health and wellbeing.

Mothers were asked: What is the big difference that '*Connecting Mums*' has made to your everyday life as a mother and parent? Among the answers:

- "Gave me confidence to know I'm not alone. Helps me get out of the house."
- "It's given me the confidence that I can cope as a mother, and I'm more valid as a human being. It's given me coping mechanisms, and to accept that I'm not always going to be perfect. I don't now compare myself to other mothers all the time."
- "Coping strategies, I'm able to ask for help. I'm able to realise I'm doing a good job, and I can do it!"
- "It's given me strength to carry on and have belief in myself as a parent."

A range of recommendations were made by beneficiaries on how the project could be enhanced even further, and these included:

- Provision of afternoon peer support group meetings for those that struggle with getting to meetings in the mornings, and provide more trained volunteers
- Early interventions – the project should be better flagged up to newly expectant and pregnant mums to ensure they are aware of the service before their baby is born
- Midwives and other health service providers should give project details and PND information to all mothers giving birth in hospital or at home to raise awareness of postnatal depression, including more posters and information fliers in hospitals and GP surgeries
- Giving more presentations at antenatal groups, as it is perceived that there is little current antenatal support locally
- Promoting the service much more thoroughly to raise awareness and combat the stigma of PND.



10 The Consultant also met, again in focus group format, with six former beneficiaries who were now acting as project volunteers and with paid project staff and other Mind volunteers. They were able to provide very up-to-date information about how the project was operating – they were frequent and avid attendees - and its current impact on the mothers accessing '*Connecting Mums*'. All were very alive to the significant personal difference made and overall sense of project achievement. Amongst the varied and extensive points they raised in the facilitated discussions, staff and volunteers reported that:

- The project was being accessed by many mothers and families from impoverished backgrounds, and that it was attractive to them as it was 'hyper-local' ('keeping it all local and safe for vulnerable women') and within easy walking distance; although many faced the continued challenge of getting themselves out of depressive states they found themselves and even just getting out of their homes along to group sessions;
- The project benefitted immensely from the passion and dedication of the manager, and from the first-hand experience of volunteers who were able to connect and communicate with mothers experiencing PND; mothers as service users are 'driving the project' and helping to secure high quality benefits, this underpinned a firm understanding of how service co-production can really work to maximise outcomes;
- That being a project volunteer had further cemented their own recovery journeys enabling them to 'heal fully', develop their confidence and then be able to reach out to others in similar circumstances, and that this is an integral additional dimension of their personal development and improving emotional health and wellbeing;
- That project benefits were much more widespread than just the mothers who were attending group sessions or receiving counselling, and in fact, that positive impacts were felt by the whole family (former beneficiaries now acting as project volunteers explained how PND adversely impacted on the whole family, even the extended family), and that project benefits were clearly ascertainable on a reasonably quick basis as many mothers respond speedily to project interventions, and visible improvements in the family situation are noted;
- That all volunteers were well trained, supported and supervised – and many said how they felt valued and looked after; and that they appreciated how the charity ensured their on-going mental health and wellbeing.

11 The consultancy procured five individual case studies designed to assess how beneficiaries themselves further identified positive outcomes for themselves and their families. These were self-directed case studies whereby the mothers wrote their 'stories' of how they became involved in '*Connecting Mums*' and how they viewed the support and help received, and what changes and differences they believed it made to their lives.

## Case Study 1

*“ Following the birth of our second child, I was on a mission to prove to the world that I was in control and that being a new mother of two was a piece of cake. I was determined to do everything myself - look after our newborn, see to our 3-year old, keep the house clean and tidy, entertain visitors, washing, shopping etc. A perfectionist by nature, I didn’t want anyone to think I couldn’t cope.*

*A couple of weeks in the strain began to tell. I started by feeling a bit frustrated that I didn’t have the time to keep on top of everything. That soon turned to annoyance, then anger and before I knew it I was the worst wife and mother in the world, and everyone would be better off without me. I would panic about not enjoying my maternity leave and worry about how I could cope when I went back to work. I wouldn’t ask for help, even though it was readily on offer, and on the odd occasion that I accepted the help I would feel like a total failure. I would take any opportunity to beat myself for being incompetent. My behaviour started to affect my relationships with my husband and my children and I soon realized I couldn’t carry on, I needed help.*

***My health visitor put me in touch with Mind. The weekly counseling sessions really helped me to understand why I was feeling that way and what I could do to help myself.*** *They gave me the means to recognise when I was heading off down the path of self-destruction and helped me to develop ways of making myself stop, take a breath and re-assess the situation. I now know that it’s ok to ask for help, people WANT to help, and I understand that not everything needs to be done right now by only me.*

*I’m now back at work and life is busy. It’s not always easy and most days there will be something that crops up to test my resolve, but I know how to control my feelings better and be aware of when I am starting to blow things out of proportion unnecessarily.*

***For me, Mind were a godsend. I can’t describe the relief I felt after just one session of pouring my heart out. There is no judgement, just help and support, and thanks to them I now live a much happier life, enjoying the precious time I get with my husband and children, rather than wasting it worrying about things that aren’t important or might never happen.”***

## Case Study 2

*“ After the birth of my son, I suffered with post natal depression but never really got it sorted as I was a new mum and I just thought it was the stress of new child mixed with being tired a lot. I had two miscarriages prior to that pregnancy and was on tenterhooks throughout. It was an overwhelming time being a new mum and trying to be perfect. I didn’t want to admit there was a problem as I thought that I would be viewed as a ‘bad mum’. So I struggled on and managed through using exercise and diet to keep my heads above the water- never truly sorting out why I got many low times.*

*When I got pregnant with my daughter my moods went haywire. I was so sick and tired, so angry all the time and even though we tried for her, I felt so low that I wished I had never got pregnant. Towards the end of the pregnancy I realised that I needed help, otherwise I would get low again so I went to my G.P and got put on medication. During one of my antenatal visits, my usual midwife was off and there was a replacement. She gave me Karen Gambie’s card and said it would be a good idea to get in touch with her.*

*That afternoon, while my son was napping, I called Karen and left a message. She called me back*

soon after and we arranged a visit. During my first visit I think I cried more than I have in a long time, I just felt so low, useless and worthless. My son's behaviour had gone really downhill. **I wasn't coping well. Karen let me talk and talk and cry and cry, but didn't let me beat myself up – she is strong yet sympathetic at the same time – which is what I needed. Someone to be understanding but positive; to tell me that there was a way through and a way to help me to the other side of my depression.**

The journey wasn't easy, and I had lots of ups and downs along the way. Karen was always there – never pushing too hard – just making sure I knew she was there to help. **I got a lot of advice and support, which really made a difference to getting better.**

**My daughter is now 15 months old and my son is four years old. I feel better than I have done in many years. I feel capable, positive and most importantly I know that I am a good mum. I have just started helping out at the groups as a volunteer and I am really enjoying it.** Not only am I able to sympathise with the mums there and understand how they are feeling, but doing the groups is giving me an enormous amount of self esteem as I can see how able I am to relate well to others.

**The support I have received from Mind during and after my pregnancy was a huge contributing factor to me getting well again.** Mental illness is not going to go away if we try to hide it or don't talk about it. It is nothing to be ashamed of. It can be overcome and your future can be bright again."

### Case Study 3

"My dream had come true! I had a gorgeous 2-year-old boy and a beautiful baby girl. Yet when I took my baby for her 6 weeks with my GP and I was asked how I was, I couldn't look the GP, face to face, and tell her I was fine. Instead I looked at her and tears streamed down my face. I had everything I wished for yet I didn't want to be me! I was feeling utter despair, and as far as I could see my children and husband would be better off if I wasn't around.

I was referred to my Health Visitor, who came to do a home visit and she referred me to Karen Gambie. When Karen arrived I had so many mixed feelings. I was so scared, fear of what would happen to me, fear of what I would have to do, fear of admitting the way I was feeling and the horrible thoughts I was having. Yet I knew that I needed help and I certainly didn't want to carry on feeling like I did.

**From the first conversation with Karen I felt (and still feel) she knew what I was thinking. She offered me home visits on a very regular basis, which was just what I needed.** I felt too ashamed to go to a group to talk about my feelings. Throughout the sessions, Karen has made me aware of my thoughts processes and developed an awareness of my feelings. **Through talking, Karen has shown me that I am valued and important. I am learning to look after my mental health and myself and to move myself up my priority list (I wasn't even on my priority list when I first met Karen!).**

I generally feel more positive about life these days. The specific support has been amazing. **Discussing it with my husband, we both feel that the support Karen and Connecting Mums have given me has been perfect for me. We feel sure that had I not received the help I needed our family life would be very different today,** and the horrible thoughts I was having could well have become a reality."

## Case Study 4

*"I visited my GP to tell her I thought I had post-natal depression, because I could not stop crying. My son was around 3 months old by the time I was diagnosed and I had been aware of mental state before I sought help. I felt anxious about having a small baby that relied on me for everything. I had a feeling of desperation, as if there was no light at the end of the tunnel and that life was never going to get any better. I felt confused, and this confusion extended into other areas of my life.*

*I had little confidence in myself as a mother, as a wife, as a person. I stopped seeing friends, was paranoid that they were leaving me out of things, and then felt even less inclined to see them. All this meant I felt isolated and unable to talk to anyone, including my husband. I had a general feeling that everyone and everything was against me, and I felt guilty that my children and husband were suffering because of my irritability and low mood.*

*Once I found the courage to see my GP, things started to get better. I was also assigned to a wonderful health visitor who visited regularly at home and had lots of practical advice. It was on the advice of my health visitor that I attended **my first support group run by Ulverston Mind (now called 'Connecting Minds')**. This got me out and about again, and most importantly in an environment where I didn't need to explain how I was feeling, because **the other women there all felt the same and were having similar difficulties managing their lives. Some of the women I met at the group have become friends, who understand me better perhaps than others who have not shared the experience of post-natal illness.**"*

## Case Study 5

*"After the birth of our first child, I developed postnatal depression. The pregnancy had been a very difficult time as my husband had taken time off work due to stress/depression and did not want his parents to know, which meant keeping them at a distance. I had only recently married, was studying, changed job and moved to an area I felt extremely isolated.*

*When our baby arrived, my husband was in the middle of having a breakdown. It was a difficult birth, and following this I had problems with breastfeeding – this was my breaking point.*

*The first help came via the district nurses, and I remember picking up Karen Gambie's number at the health centre as a friend had mentioned the help she had received. From what I remember, my first conversation with Karen was not of words, but tears (on my part). **The initial support provided through home visits was invaluable in knowing that there was something out there that cared and was accessible through visits, texts and phone calls. This was a turning point, not only for me but also for my husband and our child.** During the first year of our child's life I had some extremely dark times, there were times I was convinced that I could not go on and came close to trying to end my life. There was an occasion Karen waited with me, when times were black, to ensure my safety until I could get help.*

*Key to the turning point for all family was the recognition by MIND via the postnatal group that my husband needed help and arranging counselling for him. Without this combined approach, I could confidently say that we would not be in the position we are now in. My husband being confident and happier has put him in a place where he can continue to work and is now looking for a new job. This also has a huge impact on family life. I am getting back to normal. My studies have been completed and my focus on life has changed for the better. Central to this has been the knowledge that there is support available if I need it."*

Clearly, beneficiaries are compellingly effusive in their deep appreciation of the support and help secured from Ulverston Mind's 'Connecting Mums' project, and what it had achieved for them personally and impacted positively on their lives, leading to the recovery of their mental health and wellbeing.



***‘The health visitors speak very highly of the service provided and would really struggle to support women with postnatal illness as holistically if the service were to cease.’***

Liz Strickland, Early Years  
Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust

## Views & Comments from Stakeholders

12 The Consultant spoke with a wide range of health professionals all of whom were equally clear and robust about the positive impact of the ‘Connecting Mums’ project had had on the wellbeing and emotional health of mothers experiencing PND, commonly describing it as ‘invaluable’, ‘an additional quality and brilliant service’. Health visitors explained how they too had learnt from the project, especially from the manager, and being better equipped to identify the signs, and then assess, depression and poor mental health in new mothers. Respondents reported that the project had become a cornerstone of support for mothers who were emotionally unwell and isolated, and has it had become fully integrated into the local health service provision in antenatal terms. They greatly valued the flexibility displayed by the project, its lack of bureaucracy and its immediacy, the ability to respond to their referrals very quickly - and then feedback in a timely manner to them as health visitors, and that this was especially the case for those mothers who proved difficult or challenging to engage.

Clearly, respondents welcomed the working style of the project manager, and all placed great emphasis on her strong relationship building skills and attributes. They contended that the project has a firm preventative ethos and actions taken on an individual case-by-case basis would mitigate worse things happening or situations ‘escalating out of control.’ By adopting a ‘down to earth’ working style many reported how the project helped women to put matters into perspective and made them feel supported and nurtured.

Sister (and partner) charity – Mind-in-Furness – also greatly welcomed how well the project was operating in their area of benefit, and which has been delivered in agreement and partnership with themselves. They remark upon how pleased they are with recent developments and how well the project had grown to meet the needs of more mothers with PND in their locality. They believe that Ulverston Mind is now well-placed to further strengthen and develop its high achieving approach. There is a good working relationship between the two Mind charities, although communications require some enhancement. The local MP has also commented upon the priority he clearly attaches to the service in his constituency, and how it meet the needs of socially deprived and vulnerable women and their families.

There was real concern that many women deemed at high risk were missing out, and not getting help from the project. One health visitor remarked on there being in the region of 1,000 births in Barrow annually, and an estimated 25% of the mothers being deemed at high risk of depression and poor levels of emotional health and wellbeing. In recognising that the project is currently meeting the needs of mothers at a highly vulnerable time in their lives the health professionals express dismay at the lack of funding to continue the project, and wish to see the project expended further – and not reduced or stopped.

***“ Connecting Mums is a highly-successful and vital service, intervening at an early stage when women become depressed, and benefiting them and their families for years to come.”***

John Woodcock MP (Barrow & Furness)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

13 The '*Connecting Mums*' project has been a resounding success and this review abounds with positivity around how it has abundantly and consistently achieved improved emotional health and wellbeing for upwards of 200 beneficiaries and their families in the last four years. This has been achieved on limited budgets and paid staff. Former beneficiaries have become committed advocates for the project and helped to then deliver outcomes to more women suffering PND and poor levels of wellbeing, often in some of the poorest neighbourhoods in England. Ulverston Mind can be justly proud of what it has co-produced with beneficiaries, staff, volunteers, partner charity (Mind in Furness) and health professionals.

The model and overall approach adopted for the '*Connecting Mums*' project in promoting social connections (and social capital), and facilitated peer support groups including coping strategies and tailored counselling has contributed to the promotion of individual wellbeing and resilience; and the allied prevention and reduction of debilitating depression, isolation and loneliness. Feedback, monitoring, reports, case studies and the results of focus group and other stakeholder views support this. The services are, as stated by the project's many beneficiaries, 'invaluable', 'life-preserving' and 'life-changing' to them and make a considerable and enduring difference to their lives; often leading to a wide range of very positive outcomes for them as young mothers and their families. The 'lynchpin' role of the project manager, Karen Gambie, is a standout-contributing factor to high quality service outcomes and the project's enduring sense of mission and achievement. Undoubtedly, the continuing need for the project is documented throughout the localities it operates and the desire to scale up provision and reach more beneficiaries is demanded by health service professionals and other service providers.

In this concluding section, the Consultant would urge ongoing service provision and suggest that managers look to expand that provision to new localities and with more paid staff and volunteer teams. In section nine above, beneficiaries have made wide ranging recommendations that any continuation or expanding project service needs to be mindful of, and become a more coherent part of the service offer: tackling stigma and even more attention to early interventions and outreach.

Thus, in going forward the project needs to retain a clear focus on the main differences (outcomes) it is looking to secure (alongside continuance and expansion into additional socially disadvantaged localities) and these are:

- Reducing social isolation, the loneliness and unhappiness faced by new mothers at risk of PND or experiencing PND, and developing an improved connectedness and supportive friendship circles;
- Improved coping skills, resilience, self-confidence and reducing the feelings of stigmatisation by lessening any sense they might have of not being 'good enough' as mothers and other negative feelings;-
- Developing an all-round improved emotional health and wellbeing; and better family life and sense of agency/control in their everyday lives.

## Appendix 1

### Connecting Mums – Focus Group

16 February 2015

Focus Group discussion led by Gabrielle Ereira-Guyer  
Integrative Arts Psychotherapist

There are four '*Connecting Mums*' run groups in the South Lakeland/Barrow area, I interviewed seven women who had significant experience of using and benefiting from the project services; and regularly attended groups or were (with Karen's support) building up their confidence to go to a '*Connecting Mums*' group.

#### How did you learn about Connecting Mums?

Most of the women heard about '*Connecting Mums*' from their health visitor, others via their GP. One of the women who recently moved into the area went to her GP when her daughter was 2 ½. The GP sent her to 'First Step', which is part of Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust providing free, talking therapies to adults with depression and anxiety disorders; and are part of the national IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) programme. 'First Step' told her about '*Connecting Mums*'. A number of women had experienced CBT counselling and reported that '*Connecting Mums*' was the most helpful. Some found 1-1 counselling has been invaluable to the women, their children and families.

#### Why did you get involved?

The women reported feeling like a failure, unable to cope and having a lack of control of their everyday lives. Postnatal depression was triggered for a number of different reasons. Some mentioned that traumas and anxieties from the past, which had been buried for so long came flooding back. Some of the women had felt suicidal. One woman said her feelings for her baby were cut off because her baby nearly died.

#### Did you find it easy to access services and support?

There was a consensus that Karen and '*Connecting Mums*' helped bring women into the group making mums feel less alone and finding others who understand what they are experiencing. Some women who were unable to get to the group received invaluable support from trained volunteers (who had previously used the service) either on the telephone or on a face to face.

#### What support have you received from Connecting Mum?

All of the women had received regular 1-1 support from Karen and found the structure of the groups to be extremely supportive to themselves, their children and families. Karen has a relationship with all of the women involved, they trust her and feel that she understands. The women all agreed that Karen has a skill of texting when you need it most. The women reported that if they were not feeling strong enough to go to the group, Karen or the volunteers would contact them or visit them. Common comments included:

- "You don't have to put on a brave face on for Karen. She's got a sixth sense! I don't have to explain myself, she just understands and cares."
- "With family and friends I put on a front, but my kids suffer. In the groups I don't need to explain, it helps to know I'm not alone. Until you go to these groups you think you're the only one."
- "Hand on heart I would not be here if it wasn't for Connecting Mums. It's been a life saver."
- "Karen will come to my house and talk if I can't bring myself to come to the group."

'Connecting Mums' is also about women supporting each other. It provides a welcoming and understanding place to go. Some of the women felt they had only got through postnatal depression because of 'Connecting Mums'. In the groups, the mothers can take their children, who can play with each other, they can have a cup of tea and support each other, and sometimes there are focussed worksheets.

- "I have learnt that I am important and being a Mum is important, looking after myself is important because then my babies will thrive. Talking with my partner about sharing the tasks, even just simple things like making the sandwiches and Hoovering."

### **What benefits did the support bring you?**

A number of women had suffered from anxiety before having had children but had managed to cope. Having a baby brought up issues around their own self worth and feeling good enough. Some women reported that through Mind they now see a counsellor regularly, which is enormously helpful. They feel less alone, more important, and that someone cared.

The service was lifesaving for some because 'Connecting Mums' responded quickly when medication wasn't working. Two of the women reported:

- "Karen's support is the reason I am here today, someone on the end of the phone that you can be honest with, who remembers, so you don't have to go over things, it has helped my relationships, it benefits everyone, me, my children and the next generation."
- "The group has helped me get out of the house, I would hide away and withdraw and Karen gave me the confidence to go to a group."

### **Words to describe the impact it has had on your life**

- "Life changing"
- "Life preserving for generations because I'm bringing up my daughter to value herself"
- "Its been amazing"
- "I am aware of how I'm teaching my children about themselves, breaking cycles, Its taught me coping strategies that filter down to my kids, we are role models for our children"
- "Comforting, its very powerful when someone understands and its so lonely suffering deep inside."
- "The impact of Connecting Mums has been immense – Karen has helped us as a whole family."

### **Is it as good as it could be? How could it be better?**

- Afternoon groups would be useful for some who can't make the mornings.
- It could be useful for Mind to have a link with the midwives to make pregnant women aware of the service before the baby is born.
- The midwives could have a leaflet to give to all mums who give birth in hospital or at home to raise awareness of postnatal depression.
- Give talks at antenatal groups – there were complaints that there was not much antenatal support in the area.
- Updated Posters advertising the service in hospital and GP surgery
- Train more volunteers
- Early intervention – Coffee morning every three months for expectant and new mums.

### **Anything else?**

Focus group participants made the following points:

Kim (not real name) has family in the area but they struggle with their own lives so are unable to offer her support, she often finds herself supporting them with their difficulties. This is made possible by her



1-1 counselling and Connecting Mums service offered by Ulverston Mind.

Erika (not real name) has an understanding and close family nearby but '*Connecting Mums*' was still important, she needed someone who was detached as there was illness in the family. The service helped focus on her individual needs. Erika felt ashamed of how she felt and could not cope.

The GP refers you to a CBT counsellor at First Step; some of the women had negative experiences from 'First Step' - consultation by phone, having to wait, 8-12 weeks, and would have liked to be referred to '*Connecting Mums*' by GP.