



The SMC

We founded the Sheffield Maternity Cooperative in 2019 and have been growing ever since. We are a non-hierarchical, feminist organisation and we want to change the [birth] world! As far as we know we are the only cooperative of this kind, at least in the UK, though we hope other people want to set them up too and would be very delighted to support them.

We stand for social justice, for equality of maternity care for black and brown families, for queer and trans families, for all families. We do health care professional education, support and advocacy for pregnant people, run support and information groups and generally rock our anarchist selves, getting involved with whatever seems like a cool idea at the time.

The zine has been a fabulous project with parents and birth workers all contributing to this little booklet and exploring what being a parent, becoming a parent and being a holding-space-birth-worker really means without any of the patriarchal nonsense which is a part of so many families experiences. This is the voice of people who are often silenced in mainstream maternity care. These are the experiences of people who need and gave support to our community of birth.

We also hope that this work will inform others of what is missing, what is needed and what is damaging in current UK maternity care. This is the voice of all of the SMC, the voice of women and families and we are starting to shout.

Birth can be different. Birth is yours.

Come and join us, we love you all.

Phoebe

An Offering

In the summer of 2021, a group of women met weekly to create and talk

As they painted, and drew
Listened and stretched tired limbs

As they pushed fingers into clay
And cut images into fabric and paper

They discussed their birth experiences,
lived in the midst of a pandemic

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Here is an offering of what they shared



My baby was born October 2021 so my early pregnancy was when the pandemic first started so a lot of information and restrictions were unclear.

... if I have learnt anything in the past year, it is that time and perfectionism do not go hand-in-hand with parenting, but being in the moment, and feeling a bit naked certainly do...

I didn't feel enough support was
available for me as a first-time mum.

Women should never ever be left
alone without their birth partner
at post natal scans AND ANY PART
OF LABOUR!!!!

Thoughts and a sculpture

In the beautiful and brief moment, I had to reflect on my perinatal experience, turning clay, whilst outside the world has been engulfed by the Covid-19 through my fingers, I found myself considering the many, many layers there have been to this experience, during 9 months of pregnancy and now 9 months postpartum with my baby.

The beginning of my journey as a parent has been turbulent, exhausting and all consuming. As I was making I thought of my hands, what they have held, figured out, shaped in this time and this is expressed in the vessel I've made.

It is a container for this experience and conveys the marks that has been made on my soul and that of my daughters during a time of great stress, worry, anxiety and panic.

The maternity care I have experienced has been generous, thoughtful and hugely supportive even though in the end, I didn't have the home-birth I'd hoped for. However, my observation is that those around me have had a different experience and I question if I am unique in my positivity whilst others have faced difficulties. I would like to know if during the pandemic, there been an increase in medical interventions during birth resulting in more births by Cesarean Section? And what the lasting impact has been on those who have experienced them?

My final comment is that post-natal support and contact since giving birth has felt severely lacking and confused, whether for breastfeeding support, physical recovery from birth, questions around the health of our baby and the mental wellbeing of us as new parents.

The work of the SMC has been invaluable to me but so much more could be offered by our health services if they were supported to do so.





My experience

I gave birth to my beautiful baby in the MLU using only hypnobirthing and a tens machine. My experience was absolutely amazing and the midwives and student midwife, one in particular was incredible.

The one thing that makes me so angry was the fact I was left alone at the hospital entrance as my husband was not allowed in due to covid. I was in full active labour and had to track someone down to give my name in and explain what was happening while struggling to walk and talk.

I was left in active labour without a midwife for over an hour and eventually had to shuffle into the corridor half naked and shout for help, which was met with a patronizing remark by the receptionist.

This part of my experience fills me with rage and sadness for other women who were also left alone whilst in labour. I can't help thinking that this would never have been allowed if men were the ones who give birth...

The fact my husband was not allowed in for any post natal scans was understandable but deeply upsetting, especially as we are first time parents.

The male sonographer who did my first scan was not very sympathetic. He was more interested in telling me off for wearing disposable gloves to the appointment rather than understanding how special and important this moment was to me and how sad it was for my husband to be turned away on arrival.

This was at the very beginning of covid so the rules were not very clear. I've heard of other peoples experiences were the sonographers were much more sympathetic and understanding and it makes me really sad that special moment was tarnished by one male staff member.

(I) Gave birth to my first baby



Untitled

Hello me, it's me

I don't think you'll ever believe me but you did nothing wrong.

No one told you to look for signs of premature labour at 22 weeks.

Everyone knows that Google is the worst.

Headaches don't equal brain tumors so surely this back ache doesn't mean what this website says it might mean.

Surely that's the absolute worst case scenario...

Right?

No one told you to look for signs of premature labour at 22 weeks.

Everyone told you what was happening was normal.

"What are you so worried about? Your baby's fine."

Back pain is fine and normal.

Cramps are fine and normal.

"Some women just bleed," they shrugged.

No one told you to look for signs of premature labour at 22 weeks.

Everyone said they were just going to keep an eye on you,
Just in case.

“There was no indication you were in labour when you came to the hospital.”

Not even with all that AND the two different infection markers?

At what point then?

Maybe after ringing the midwives over and over because the pain and bleeding got exponentially worse?

Terrified and alone in a hospital room because your husband had already used his allotted one-hour visit?

Wondering why on earth it would take more than five hours for a doctor to prescribe stronger pain meds and come check you out?

I don't think you'll ever believe me but you did nothing wrong.

Maybe no one ever told them to look for signs of premature labor at 22 weeks either.



*Wisdom is seeing the shape of your life
Without obliterating (getting over)
a single instant
of it.*

- Albert Huffstickler

Early Days

It's not the end of it that matters
But the shape of it.
Sit comfortably with it
Or uncomfortably
But sit.

It's not so bad.

It is a disservice to say goodbye or
Even good riddance.
It is part of our story

& it is the strongest part.
To grieve it is to show its strength and importance
To not grieve only gives way to weakness.

Among others who do not seem to weep
There are weepers.
Among those who are stronger than armies
Are the same that feel weakest.
That fear the dark
Are wisest.

So unclench that jaw dear one and
Enable the space within and without
To be so and to be you and to be.

And to thrive and enable so in her.
Grief and mourning would be to gain where there is loss.

Untitled

Searing. The pain of realising the reality.

That this, the worst moment
of your whole entire life.

Your child's life

hanging

in the

balance.

That this moment. You must do. Alone.

You plead, beg, break down. They ask what you need. You say him. Only
him.

They say sorry.

It's the rules.

And with that

they sentence you.

To sit at the bedside, alone.

To watch the machine breathe in, breathe out, for your baby, alone.

To register every beep, every fucking beep, somewhere deep in your soul,
alone

To be taken into rooms, alone.

Told things no one can bare to hear, alone.

To be scared, beyond measure, beyond words, alone.

To fear the worst.

To fear yourself.

To fear for everything

crashing

down.

To fear. Alone.
And you must go on,
 each hour,
 each day. You must go on.

You must sit with him, through the seconds,
 the minutes,
 the hours,
days,
 weeks.

You must sit with him. Hold him. Be with him.
Because whatever else happens, you know, he must not be
 Alone.



g
WATER
EXTINGUISHER
capacity

WARNING
THIS IS NOT A FIRE
EXTINGUISHER

One day.

One day your skin will feel the sun again
And his eyes will widen at the grass beneath his toes

One day you will bask together in a multicoloured hammock
It's rainbow threads tying you together in an infinite bond

One day he will look at you with such pure, innocent love
It will prick your eyes with instant tears

One day you will hope this summer lasts forever
After wishing away the bleakest of winters

One day you will know that you are everything he needs
Your fear and panic slowly dissolving like thawing snow

But for today, just know.

You.

Can.

Do.

This.

Conclusion

We've had overwhelming positive feedback on this project, and the workshops and the experiences that people have gained in the various spaces we've created. A reminder of the power in simple spaces set up to facilitate stories and peer support, something often undervalued.

We've heard almost universally that the information surrounding Covid restrictions was unclear, especially toward the beginning of the pandemic. Postnatal support and contact being lacking and confused were also recurring themes, and it became clear that this made it especially scary for first time pregnant people.

Many people shared that they were left alone during labour at one of the most vulnerable moments of their lives and others told of a lack of sympathy and understanding of the difficulties they experienced or the significance of a key moment.

Some people have shared that they thought problems complications and the stress resulting from them could have been avoided they were properly checked up on or if the concerns they had raised were addressed and not dismissed.

The restrictions on people being allowed to be present with pregnant people in hospital made one thing abundantly clear. The huge significance and benefit of partners and loved ones being present during birth and during the various stages along the journey.

Looking forward, what will the lasting impacts be of this time for the people involved and their families? Mental and physical. Have there been an increase in medical interventions during birth resulting in more births by Cesarean Section? And what the lasting impact has been on those who have experienced them?

Will any lessons be learnt from this and will they be put into action to improve the care given to pregnant people during times of burden on our healthcare system?

Artists who held space

Collage Workshop

Birungi Kawooja

www.birungikawooyaart.com

@birungiart

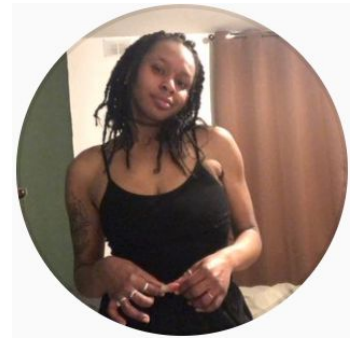


Poetry Workshop

Wemmy Ogunyankin

www.wemmyogunyankin.co.uk

@wemmyogunyankin



Life Drawing

Liah Edwardes

www.facebook.com/Liahedwardesart/

@liah.edwardes



Poetry Drive

Carly Mountain

www.carlymountain.com



FIN

Services that could offer additional assistance and support during pregnancy and birth.

Assist (Sheffield)

City of Sanctuary (Sheffield)

Birthrights (National)

Maternity Action (National)

Us! (Sheffield Maternity Cooperative)

Some Local Resources

- Always talk to your GP immediately about any concerns you may have. Midwives can also refer you, though often people develop symptoms after they are discharged from Midwifery Care.
- Perinatal Mental Health Service – you will need a referral here from a health care professional or social worker.
- Crisis Teams – you can be referred through your GP or via A&E (they are excellent in Sheffield)
- The Light Centre – free support, counselling and resources, in Norfolk Park.

www.lightpeersupport.org.uk/

Some National Resources

- The Maternal Mental Health Alliance:
www.maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/
- PANDAs Foundation: www.pandasfoundation.org.uk/
- Homestart UK: www.home-start.org.uk/

With thanks to



www.healthwatchsheffield.co.uk

