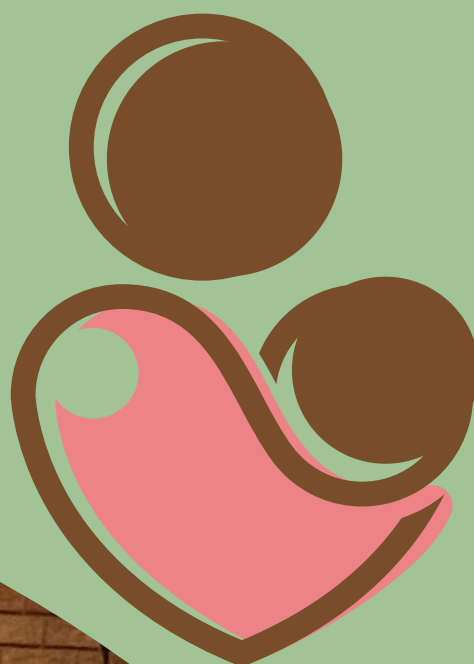


Maternity Care Project report



afrocats

Project partners



Afrocats is Black-led charity that supports people in Manchester who face exclusion because of their immigration status, class, age, cultural inexperience, and education.



The Caribbean and African Health Network (CAHN) work to eradicate health inequalities within a generation for Caribbean and African people in Greater Manchester and beyond.



Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust is an NHS Acute Foundation Trust which operates 10 hospitals throughout Greater Manchester. It is the largest NHS trust in the United Kingdom.



The Ardwick and Longsight Primary Care Network is a group of practices that work together



10GM is a joint venture to support the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Greater Manchester.

Foreward

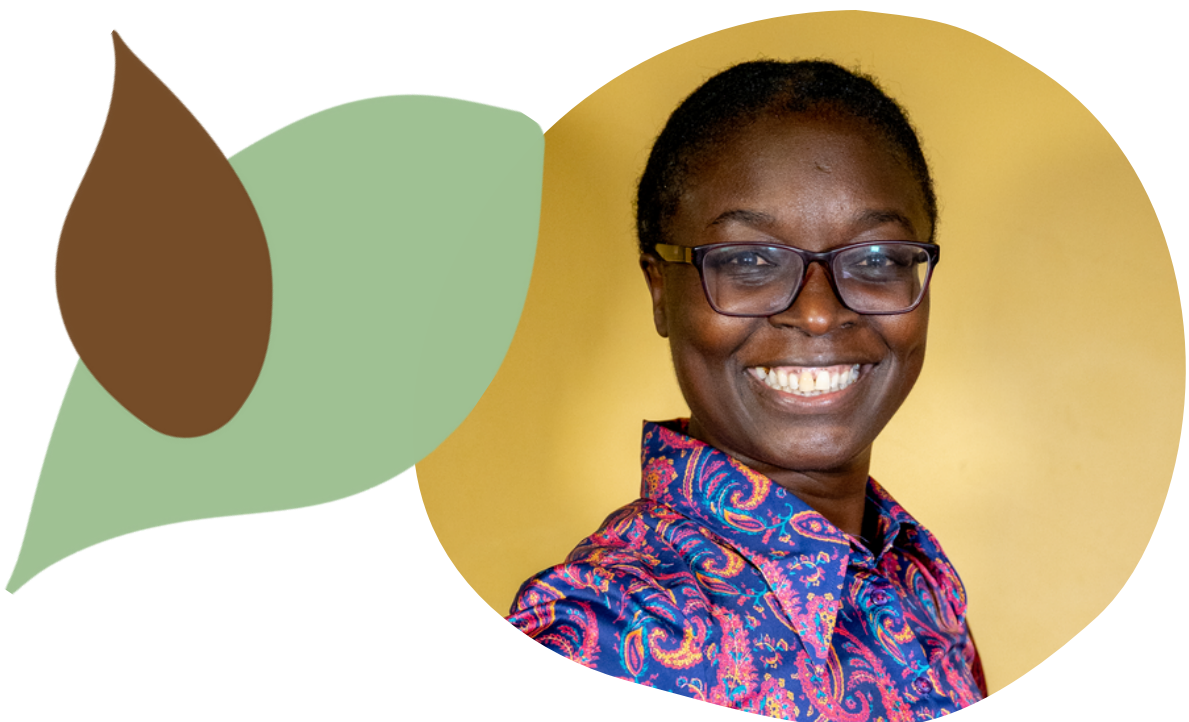
Through consultation with women we work with in the Little Lions group, we identified that they faced considerable barriers to accessing local support services on their journey to motherhood. From this consultation, Maternity Care was born.

Working with the Caribbean and African Health Network, Ardwick and Longsight Primary Care Network and the University of Manchester NHS Foundation Trust to support the Little Lions has been a great privilege.

We have seen how through working in partnership with community connectors and frontline services we can deliver considerable health and wellbeing benefits to women who face trauma due to their immigration status.

I hope that the learnings from this project will go on to reduce the health inequalities that women seeking asylum and refugees experience in the UK's health system.

Magdalen Bartlett
Aftocats CEO



Background

Often, women seeking asylum and refugees have distrust in medical professionals and avoid reporting to institutions such as the NHS out of fear of deportation. This can be exacerbated by a deep-rooted fear of racialised stigma and hostile immigration policies, that deter women from sharing personal information with public bodies.

Despite maternal and infant mortality rates declining in the UK, sadly studies have found that Black, Asian, and minority ethnic women have significantly higher morbidity and mortality rates and poorer experiences of healthcare (Moller et al, 2019).

Black, Asian and minority ethnic women also face unequal access to maternity services in the UK and have poorer health outcomes compared to white British women (Garcia et al, 2015).

A report from Doctors Of The World in April 2022 highlighted how despite greater focus on the maternity inequalities experienced by British-born Black, Asian and minority ethnic women, the experiences of migrant women are often not heard.

The Doctors Of The World report mirrors many of our experiences, where women seeking asylum do not access front-line services available to women and their babies. The likely result is that the women and their children experience poorer health outcomes.



Little Lions

Little Lions is a small but growing network of women mainly from the Eastern African countries of Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Still, the support group is open to African and Asian women in general.

The group comprises single mothers, many of whom are widowed. All the women experience trauma due to their experiences navigating the UK's asylum system and the structural barriers they face due to their race and immigration status.

Many of the women in this network have experienced sexual and gender-based trauma, including trafficking and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Many women in this group have complex health and social care needs and limited access to support services, volunteering opportunities and creative activities.

Often people from asylum-seeking and refugee backgrounds have poor mental health due to trauma due to their experiences. A high proportion of women in this have experienced domestic violence. Many have very low self-esteem and fragmented support networks.



Maternity Care sessions

Our Maternity Care test and learn site connected women from the Little Lions network with professionals and front-line services across the health and social care network.

Outputs

- 30 women
- 8 sessions
- 4 professionals (Midwife, Social prescriber, Clinician/Nurse and Health Visitor)
- 1 Community Connector

In each session, the women could raise specific questions about their health. Through discussion, they learned new ways to improve their lifestyles.

Their children could access a playroom and toys while they attended the session.

Every session started with a signature Afrocats dance session to get the women relaxed, present and ready to engage.

Session 1

For the first session, the women were introduced to Rozina, from the Primary Care Network's Be Well programme.

Rozina delivered a presentation about the local health and social services that are available for women in the local area.

Through the session, we discovered that women from this group struggle to communicate with their GPs and as a result are unable to access vital information about their bodies.

Language barriers pose the biggest obstacle when interacting with the NHS.

Rozina was able to talk to the women about how to address their GPs to obtain referrals and get access to vital information about their health.



Session 2

Two Sure Start representatives, Zarah and Leah, attended the second session and they supplied free vitamins for all the women and children in the group.

They informed the women that if they registered with a local Sure Start Centre, they could get a monthly supply of vitamins for free whilst they were pregnant and up to their baby's first birthday.

Zarah and Leah told the women which vitamins were suitable for vegetarian and halal diets.

The women were told that if they ask at the reception of Ardwick's Sure Start centre for Claudette and Leah, they can assist with any language barriers that may arise as they speak Arabic.

The women were extremely happy and grateful as their GPs had told them to buy the essential recommended vitamins, but this was not always possible, particularly with the current cost of living crisis.

Afrocats, along with partners were able to break this barrier for the women to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Leah reassured the women that they could receive support from health visitors who conduct weekly drop-ins at Ardwick Sure Start.



Session 3

For the second session, we were joined by Flo, one of CAHN's Community Connectors.

After the dance warm-up, the session started with a recap about Healthy Start vouchers for the women to access vitamin D, milk and fruit and vegetables.

During this session, we mapped local services with the women such as food banks and places to get clothing.

We went through each service with women, with interpretation, so that each woman could understand what was available.

Some of the women had used food banks but did not like that they could not select items and did not find it helpful as there wasn't always food that was culturally appropriate to them.

We found that most women had not heard of any of the services that were available to them in the local area and they wanted more information.



Session 4

The main purpose of this session was to get our participants to come directly to one of Sure Start centres so they could familiarise themselves with the neighbourhood, the venue, public transport routes and services available.

A room was specially set up with a big playroom. This really helped the women concentrate on the information provided while their children played. In addition to this, Sure Start Centre staff provided food parcels for the women, educational materials, and toys for children for free.

Magdalen from Afrocats, with the help of an interpreter, did a thorough reading of the Longsight Sure Start Centre services brochure. This helped the women to fully understand how they could benefit from these centres.

The women were interested in accessing a midwife as well as activities for babies and toddlers.

They raised interest regarding speech therapy for their children and as a result, were referred to the Healthy Child Clinic service offered at Longsight Sure Start Centre.

As a result of the safe space that had been created, the women felt confident to raise questions.

By explaining in detail what every service meant and translating when they couldn't understand we were able to break down the language barriers that continue to be the primary issue the women face when accessing public health and social services in Manchester.



Session 5

The theme of this week's session was food banks and supporting the women to access Ardwick and Longsight Food Bank. Women brought proof of residence and provided all their data with the help of Afrocat's project assistant. They were all very interested in accessing this service.

Unfortunately, during the session, we discover that since many of them are benefiting from Universal Credit, they do not qualify for this food bank. Despite Magdalen, Afrocats' CEO, enquiring about access in advance of the session, she was not given this information.

Once again this highlights the many communication barriers that exist within local welfare services. We recognise that these barriers are the main obstacle the community faces, and we will continue to work to dismantle them.



Session 6

The women joining this session were told the reason why they could not qualify to benefit from Ardwick and Longsight Food Bank. As additional support, Afrocats provided alternatives to access affordable food locally.

The main purpose of this session was to provide health advice about pregnancy. Children were attended by a member of the Afrocats team so women could speak freely and uninterrupted.

Sandra Cahill is a midwife and during the session, she addressed general and collective concerns around pregnancy.

One of the attendees enquired about infections and Sandra kindly attended to her concern individually. We then moved on to general health advice which Sandra advised the women on.

At the end of the session, Sandra asked the women's opinion about St. Mary's hospital services to which they expressed frustration about calling waiting times and waiting times before accessing a delivery room.

She informed them that a new system was being put into place where two different contact numbers would be provided, one for emergencies and another one for routine enquiries to reduce waiting times.

Overall, women were thoroughly engaged in this session. Translation was necessary and we were able to answer all their questions clearly.



Session 7

Refugees and asylum seekers have a higher likelihood of experiencing health concerns as a result of the experiences that they live through, life choices and cultural habits.

Poor diet as a result of their immigration status, higher chances of having diabetes - and a propensity to seek medical care later than most further exasperated the health disparities they experience.

For our final session, we were joined by Carlos who is an NHS Development Coordinator.

Carlos's work focuses on finding out what barriers the Ardwick and Longsight community face regarding uptaking bowel cancer screenings.

He collected the ages and ethnicity of the women. He then explained the risks of bowel cancer and how it disproportionately affects communities of African and Asian descent.

The group were briefed about the NHS Screening Programme which offers bowel cancer screenings every two years to all men and women aged 60 to 74. If caught early, bowel cancer has a 90% chance of recovery.

Carlos advised the women to pass on this information to older family members who might benefit from screening.

He assured the women that exercising and eating a healthy diet, a balanced nutritious diet and up taking the test kit when eligible is key to reducing the risk and better chance of treatment.

Only two out of 18 women, including the two volunteers, had heard about bowel cancer. By the end of the session, all women had learnt something new about bowel cancer.

The women were encouraged by Carlos to speak to the men in their lives as the bowel cancer screening uptake for men in the community is lower than for women.

All the women said they will be on the lookout for the screening kit when eligible and encourage eligible members of their families to not hesitate to test themselves.

Finally, we performed a survey where we asked the group what would prevent them from seeking treatment if they experienced any symptoms in the future.

Almost everyone mentioned language, the primary barrier reported throughout the Maternity Care sessions.

The women felt at the end of the session that they have learnt something new, and they would like to find out more information about bowel cancer and how they can reduce the risk.

Carlos reassured the women that information is available in Arabic which leads to knowing where to look for information and how.

The group made a valid point by saying you cannot search for what you don't know or not looking for.

This is why sessions such as the Maternity Care project is vital, as it informs, and it gives room for further development, knowledge and better health care decision being taken by the community who needs it most.



Session 8

For the final Maternity Care session we were joined by Anulika Ifezue, a specialist Health Visitor and Lead for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health.

Anulika gave the women an inspiring example of how communication with your child plays a big part in child development and how interaction through toys and books helps.

An adult to a child may appear as a giant, women are advised to step down to the child level when speaking and playing with the children for better learning, interaction and brain development.

Anulika is passionate about helping mothers and families to interact well with their babies and told the women that she was available to answer any questions that will support the wellbeing of mothers and their babies while accessing the maternity project.

All the women asked for her to return to have more time to discuss concerns and share the success of the advice after they applied it.

The session was also an opportunity to showcase and celebrate the project. Attendees got to hear from the professionals and participants who took part in the project and celebrate the learning journey that everyone has been on.



Senait's* story

Senait* didn't know about Sure Starts centres before joining our Maternity Care project. After joining a session she was able to learn about the mother and baby activities and services available to equip her with enough knowledge and strategies to support her child with difficult behaviours and learn how to play effectively as a family.

"Before Afrocats we just sit around at home doing nothing, now we come to the group, we have fun, have different friends from different countries.

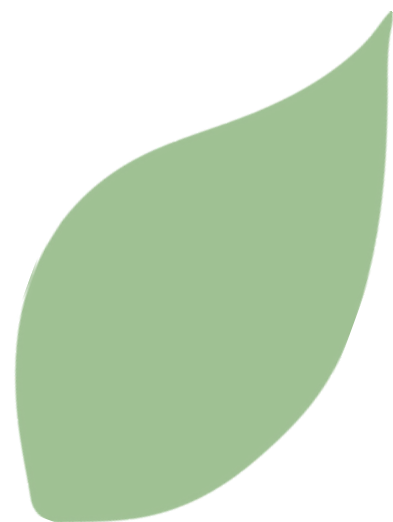
"It's good for children as well meet other children and play, the group is good for adults and children. I now know how I can get free vitamin D which I didn't know about before.

"In the group, we can practice speaking English, and dance as well. The best thing about attending this group is receiving vitamin D because before I was very tired, with no energy now I am taking Vitamin D I don't feel as tired as before, the Vitamin is good for me and my children.

"Here you can get help, ask about anything you want, before I did not know about Surestart, I only hear about Sure Start here.

"In this group you can get support if your child can't speak, we now know about speech therapists. My daughter enjoys playing with other children before the house was boring now coming here my daughter can enjoy it.

"My wellbeing has improved and I will keep coming and also tell people to come."



Kerens* story

knew about Sure Start centres but was unaware of the excellent activities that they provide and the support the service offers to expectant and new mothers. The community connectors supported her to communicate her need to Sure Start outreach workers.

Without the group, Keren wouldn't have known about the excellent support available for families in Longsight and Ardwick. Now Keren is happy because someone has cared enough to encourage her to come in, seek help and receive holistic support through the dance she loves and maternity project which is teaching her so much allowing her to improve her wellbeing.

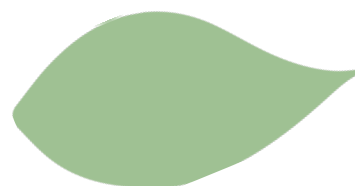
"Since I attend the group I have been given advice and received support. I have learnt about Longsight Foodbank and Healthy Starts Vouchers.

"Two Months ago I was very sleepy but now after taking vitamin D I feel better, I asked my GP to give me Vitamins but got nothing. I know where I can get more when the one I have is finished thanks to this group

"I now feel confident to not just pass by Sure Starts but to walk in and get support. Thanks to this group I know Zarah the receptionist who speaks Arabic. Before I was afraid of not being understood.

"I know that other women from this group will go to Sure Start now. It will be fun for my children. I don't worry as my child plays with other children when we visit at Sure Starts.

"Thanks to this project by Afrocats, I now know what support is in my neighbourhood. I feel supported. I have booked an appointment to come back next week for further support. The professionals have made me feel safe. I will not feel alone or have fear of not being heard. "



Our findings

We feel proud about delivering life-saving information to vulnerable women from our community.

Migrant women have considerable barriers to accessing primary care services due to language barriers and also cultural differences.

This project has provided a safe environment where women felt confident enough to ask questions they wouldn't normally ask.

By doing this, we continue to build bridges that connect those who suffer from social exclusion to services available to them to reduce the health risks which are disproportionately higher for immigrant women in the UK.

The women on this project are going through a lot of difficulties which is exasperated by limited childcare support.

The first year of a baby's life is vital, and early intervention and support such as the Maternity Care project sets up a mother and her child for future success which is less likely to be achieved without.

In the UK, asylum-seeking and refugee women face high mortality rates during pregnancy it should be of utmost importance that barriers to accessing health services on time are broken down.

These barriers can mean that the women find it hard to retain and as a result, the families are losing out on essential support they need in order to have a better health outcome.

This is why it is vital for organisations such as CAHN and Afrocats to continue to receive vital funding to support the communities that are too often underrepresented.



Recommendations

The NHS should:

- Collaborate with the VCSE sector to enhance information sharing and accessibility of services for refugees and asylum seekers.
- Facilitate a mutually beneficial relationship between community organisations and healthcare professionals.
- Create sustainable resources for both parties to leverage.
- Bring healthcare services to communities to build trust in the system.
- Provide support and funding for access needs to enable everyone to participate.
- Ensure there are sufficient resources to use creativity to connect communities with healthcare networks.
- Fund a lead organisation within the community to oversee all activities and schedules to ensure flawless execution.



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