AIMS For a better birth...

Birth Activists Briefing: Why it's important for you to get involved in your local Maternity Voices Partnership (MVP)

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By the AIMS Campaigns Team

Maternity Voices Partnerships (MVPs) are a key element of the landscape for maternity service improvement in England.[1] In order for them to function effectively, they require sustained input from committed local 'service user representatives', who are willing to work hard for the interests of maternity service improvement in their local area. And that's where you – or someone you know – might come in. In this article, we will brief you on the key role of Maternity Voices Partnerships and encourage and support you to get involved.

England has long prided itself on having a decent national maternity policy, much of that thanks to an impressive maternity service improvement community (of which AIMS – for the last 60 years – has been a key member). But we also know that structural problems persist and that good policy doesn't always translate well to every encounter that local service users have with the maternity services. This is where local MVPs can be vital. So that there is no postcode lottery when it comes to high-quality maternity services. So that we leave no one behind[2].

So what are Maternity Voices Partnerships ?

Maternity Voices Partnerships are "independent formal multidisciplinary committees" which bring people together "to influence and share in local decisions" about maternity services.Better Births guidance (2017)[3] asks Local Maternity Systems to ensure that all service users in their area (and their partners and families) are able to participate in a Maternity Voices Partnership, either by giving feedback or by becoming service user members of a partnership. And according to that national guidance, maternity service users and their families should make up a third of the members of each MVP.

Some of our English readers may be more familiar with the idea of a Maternity Service Liaison Committee (MSLC). Since the Better Births report (2016),[4] most local Maternity Service Liaison Committees have transitioned to become Maternity Voices Partnerships. But it's not simply a change of name. The MVP concept is now very well embedded into the national framework for maternity service improvement work, in a way that MSLCs never were. Another key change is that MVPs should now be led by a paid and independent Service User Chair. Neither of those changes in themselves necessarily mean that your local MVP will be an effective one, of course. However, they do mean that your input on an

MVP is likely to be more worthwhile than similar work on an MSLC. Those who are there to represent the service user perspective should now have a key ally in the Chair, if that was not the case previously. This is because the Chair can no longer have a role in the maternity services you are there to improve (whether within the Trust or within the local CCG). Rather, the Chair will be there to ensure that those Trust and CCG members of the MVP will continue to play an important role in the Partnership, but not one that is in any way superior to the Service User Representative members. The leadership of the Chair – to ensure that this is the case – is crucial.

So what's the problem? AIMS has heard from our Members and Volunteers over the years that being a Service User Representative on an MVP (and previously on an MSLC) can be hard: really hard, actually! It can be hugely stressful to feel that you are one lone voice against 'the system', where even the Chair can sometimes seem like part of the system you're trying to 'speak up' to. Whilst AIMS hopes that this position will change in the coming years, as MVP chairs find their feet and come to appreciate the vital contribution of Service User Representatives and how to support them, we aren't going to lie to you about the difficulties you might face. For some of our members, being on an MVP and trying to speak up on behalf of service users has, quite frankly, been the hardest work challenge they've ever faced. But please, don't make this a reason not to step up, or maybe step up again.

AIMS is keen to play our part in supporting the success of MVPs, in particular by supporting isolated local Service User Representatives. In that context, we would like to publicise a new AIMS-led space for MVP Service User Representatives. We envisage this as a one hour monthly zoom call where you can come together with other Service User Representatives and share experiences and learning in a mutually supportive way, so that you can each engage more productively at a local level. We hope that sounds like the support network you need to make that decision to step up to a role on your local MVP!

So … Please consider taking part in your local MVP. MVPs are a key space for engagement and a key space for you to help to deliver the AIMS mission. Yes, it requires a keen interest in maternity service improvement (which you surely have already in reading this Journal!) and a commitment to being present in the discussions and to putting in the necessary work, but if we don't step up and show up, we risk MVPs that fail to reach their potential. AIMS believes that MVPs must play their part in tackling the everyday trouble that people encounter with the maternity services, some of which translates into truly unacceptable experiences and outcomes. For MVPs to stand a chance, they are crucially dependent on the engagement of people who have experienced the system first-hand and who are committed to seeing improvement for all those who come after us. We are here to support you!

Action for Birth Activists:

1. Find your local Maternity Voices Partnership. You should be able to find details of your local MVP via your local Trust or CCG website. Alternatively, visit the National Maternity Voices website and use their 'find an MVP' service'.[5]
2. Sign up as a Service User Representative. Get involved.
3. If you would like to share your experience and/or join the AIMS network for MVP Service User

Representatives please email campaigns@aims.org.uk

Further reading

If you would like to understand the role envisaged for MVPs in National Maternity Transformation, section 4 of this national guidance document might be a good place to start:

nhs-guidance-maternity-services-v1.pdf (england.nhs.uk)

This AIMS Journal article should also be helpful in explaining the role and ambition for MVPs:

Implementing Better Births: Why Maternity Voices Partnerships (MVPs) are key (by Laura James, AIMS Journal, 2018, Vol 30, No2)

There is also lots of really useful information about Maternity Voice Partnerships and the role of Service User Representatives on the National Maternity Voices (NMV) website. National Maternity Voices is the national group of Maternity Voices Partnerships in England. They support and advise the service user chairs of MVPs. You may want to start with this document, which offers a really good sense of the role of the service user chair:

Service User Rep Info Pack (nationalmaternityvoices.org.uk)

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[1] Different arrangements exist in Scotland; Wales and Northern Ireland retain the MSLC structure.

[2] unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind

[3] NHS England (2017), 'Implementing *Better Births*: A resource pack for Local Maternity Systems': www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/nhs-guidance-maternity-services-v1.pdf

[4] NHS England (2016), 'Better Births: Improving outcomes of maternity services in England': www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/national-maternity-review-report.pdf

[5] National Maternity Voices website, 'Find an MVP': nationalmaternityvoices.org.uk/find-an-mvp.