

Kirklees Council

Director of Public Health

Executive Summary 2025/26

Women's Voices, Advocacy, and Reducing Inequalities



ACHIEVING INCLUSION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Women's Voices, Advocacy, and Reducing Inequalities Kirklees Director of Public Health Annual Report 2025/26



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Overview

The Kirklees Director of Public Health Annual Report 2025/26 focuses on women's voices, advocacy, and reducing inequalities in maternity care. It highlights that when women feel listened to, respected and involved in decisions about their care, experiences and outcomes improve. Conversely, where women do not feel heard or believed, this can contribute to poorer physical and emotional outcomes, diminished trust in services and widening inequalities. While the report uses maternity care as its primary focus, the lessons and recommendations are relevant across women's health more broadly.

“

I felt encouraged to make the choice that was right for me and was supported throughout. I felt in control of my birth and it turned out to be the best birth experience I have had.

– A woman sharing her experience of maternity care in Kirklees

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Understanding inequalities

Significant inequalities in maternity outcomes continue to exist nationally and locally. Women from Black, Asian and mixed ethnicity backgrounds, those living in deprived communities, women facing language barriers, disabilities or trauma, and those experiencing wider social disadvantage are more likely to experience poorer outcomes and poorer experiences of care. National policy, reviews and evidence, including the [NHS England Three-Year Delivery Plan for Maternity and Neonatal Services](#), consistently identify listening to women and addressing inequalities as central to improving safety, experience and outcomes.

Local data shows that inequalities are evident across a range of maternity indicators in Kirklees. Infant mortality rates remain significantly higher than the England average and are substantially worse in the most deprived communities. Stillbirth and neonatal mortality rates are also higher than national averages, with particular risks associated with deprivation, ethnicity, and maternal age. Inequalities are seen in smoking during pregnancy, breastfeeding initiation, obesity, low birthweight and stillbirth rates, all of which are strongly linked to deprivation and, in some cases, ethnicity. These findings align with the national focus on reducing variation set out through [CORE20PLUS5](#) and the [Saving Babies' Lives Care Bundle](#).

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Improving outcomes

Maternity outcomes are influenced by much more than healthcare alone. Wider determinants such as poverty, housing, transport, employment, education, health literacy, discrimination and social isolation all shape women's experiences and outcomes. These factors can affect access to services, confidence in asking questions, ability to understand information, and opportunities to make informed choices. Reducing inequalities therefore requires a whole-system response that extends beyond maternity services, reflecting the prevention and early life emphasis within the Department of Health and Social Care's [Best Start for Life report](#).

The importance of listening to women's lived experiences is central to reducing inequalities. Women across Kirklees described many examples of compassionate, high-quality care and valued staff who took time to listen, explain information clearly, respect cultural needs and involve them in decisions. However, women also reported challenges including difficulties accessing services, inconsistent communication, language and interpretation barriers, feeling uninformed about choices, feeling pressured into decisions, not always having concerns taken seriously, and variation in the consistency of care received. These experiences can undermine confidence, trust, and engagement with services.

Advocacy

Advocacy (personal support to ensure an individual understands their options, and their views and needs are effectively communicated) has an important role in helping women navigate services, understand information, access support and have their voices heard. This may be provided through specialist services, peer support, community organisations, family members, or trusted professionals. Good advocacy helps women understand choices, express preferences, participate in decision-making and influence service improvement. It is particularly important for women experiencing additional barriers associated with language, culture, disability, trauma or social disadvantage. This is consistent with national expectations for listening and co-production through Maternity and Neonatal Voices Partnership (MNVP) guidance.

Examples of effective practice

Kirklees has many examples of effective practice that are helping to address inequalities and strengthen women's voices. These include the MNVP, Auntie Pam's, SWANS (Support for Women in Antenatal Service), Community Champions, Befriender Programmes, Listening Circles, Families Together, and targeted maternity inequality initiatives within local NHS trusts. These approaches demonstrate how trusted relationships, co-production, peer support and community-led engagement can improve experiences, strengthen advocacy and help women access the support they need.

Next steps

Listening to women is fundamental to improving care and reducing inequalities. The report sets out six calls to action for the local system, maternity services, and wider partners.

1. Strengthen advocacy and ensure women's voices shape both individual care and service design.
2. Take targeted action to reduce inequalities in outcomes and experiences.
3. Improve communication and support informed choice.
4. Provide personalised, compassionate, trauma-informed and culturally responsive care.
5. Address the wider determinants of health, including poverty, housing, transport, and health literacy.
6. Build on the strengths of communities, community organisations, and trusted local networks.

Ultimately, safer, fairer, and more equitable maternity care depends on creating services where every woman feels heard, believed, respected and empowered. By strengthening advocacy, reducing inequalities and acting on women's experiences, Kirklees can improve outcomes not only during pregnancy and birth, but throughout women's lives and across future generations.

To read the full report, go to:

[Director of Public Health Report | Kirklees Council](#).