

## **Maternal Health and Early Years consultation event with Gypsy and Traveller mothers, mothers to be and female family members.**

Tuesday 18 December 2012

Willowbrook Centre  
48 Willowbrook Road  
SE15 6BW

### **Present:**

Ann-Marie O'Brien - Southwark Travellers Action Group (STAG)  
Anna Rawlinson - Children's Centre midwife  
Jo Anne Gould - Southwark Council Early Years  
Julie Timbrell - Southwark Council Scrutiny  
Rahala Manna - Southwark Council Community Engagement  
Traveller Participant  
Traveller Participant  
Traveller Participant  
Traveller Participant

The aim of the session was to listen to the community about their experiences of Maternity and Early Years services, discuss the services available, start to explore how to better meet the needs of the community and promote access to services, and build relationships.

This is a summary of the discussion:

### **Midwifery**

Anna explained that the midwives look after women from ten weeks after conception, during birth and for the postnatal period. Women can refer themselves directly to the service. The midwife will look after the pregnant woman, whatever her health condition, and in partnership with other professionals if there are any existing or emerging medical conditions. Midwives support women to access the type of birth that they would like. This can be in hospital or at home.

Women spoke about their experience of maternity care. This ranged across a poor experience at St Thomas's hospital with an induced birth, a good experience with King's and a supportive midwife, a good experience for an expectant mum at her GP practice and a good experience of an anti-natal clinic staffed by a King's midwife, based at the now closed one o'clock club at Leyton Square.

### **Anti-Natal classes**

Women did not take up anti-natal classes and instead relied on the support of mothers and other female relatives. Husbands did not traditionally attend birth, but now sometimes they would come along, but the women would take a more active role. Often a couple of female relatives would attend the birth, but occasionally there would be more women. One or two of the women showed a tentative interest in attending anti natal classes.

## **Early Years**

The Leyton Square O'clock club used to hold a weekly session, specifically for Traveller women, on a weekday morning at 10:30 am. This initiative was well regarded. The session provided a space for women and children to meet and access Early Years provision. There were crèche facilities so that the women could attend the anti natal clinic and do parenting classes. Supplementary activities were also held, such as talks on obesity, dentistry, the toy library visited etc. The women particularly praised the parenting skills classes, and the certificate received on completion was appreciated. Women who used this club went on to use other activities at the one 'o'clock club. The mothers and STAG noted that this session provided a route to access other provision, such as nursery school and the Early Years offer, by helping to get the children ready for school, and the mothers comfortable with services.

The club was initiated to replace a play scheme and funded by Sure Start. Sure Start funding has now ended, however Leyton Square has been taken over by Nell Gwyn Nursery School and East Peckham Children's Centre and it could be worth exploring if they have the resources to restart this activity, particularly if a similar session would be well used.

Jo Anne spoke about the Early Year services and Children's Centre magazines were handed out. The women reported that that they did not use Children's Centres, and they did not think other Gypsy and Traveller women did, although a few women did send their child to nursery school.

## **Breast Feeding**

There was a discussion about breast-feeding. The midwife spoke about the benefits of breast-feeding. The women explained how virtually all the women bottle fed and the main reason was concerns over modesty, both a reluctance to feed in public and because male relatives were likely to pop into their homes frequently. Some ways around this concern were discussed, such as using a shawl. There was a discussion about bottle-feeding being a relatively new cultural practice and the women agreed with this and said that their grandmothers and great grandmothers did breast feed. Some of the women said that they did understand the advantages of breast-feeding, through discussions with their midwives.

## **Weaning**

The current advice to wean your baby at 6 months was discussed. The advice on the age to wean your child has increased with time, and there was a discussion about taking cues from your baby. A few women said that taster amounts of food were sometime introduced from 2 1/2 to 3 months. Food intolerances were also discussed.

## **Sexual health**

Sex for women before marriage was taboo. However, it is culturally more acceptable for men to be sexually active prior to marriage. There was concern that women could be a risk of urinary tract infections etc on marriage. Often, but not always, marriage was quickly followed by a pregnancy. There was a discussion on the benefits of health screening, either at marriage or in early pregnancy. Traveller teenagers are

usually removed from sex education classes at school. Young women will often access health advice from older female relatives, such as aunts.

### **Miscarriage, still birth, neo natal and child deaths**

There was brief discussion that nationally the rates for miscarriage, still birth, neo natal death and child deaths are high for gypsy and traveller women. However, it was not thought child deaths were that prevalent, however there was anecdotal evidence that miscarriage and stillbirths were high (although it was noted that around half of all women will typically experience a miscarriage). There is a high level of smoking within the community, and smoking by men and women can increase the likelihood of miscarriage.

### **Domestic violence**

It was noted that a referral to the police or other agency for domestic violence automatically generated an alert to social services and to the child's school. There was concern that this could lead to breaches of confidentiality, through friends and family finding out, and also concern that Social Service's involvement in a family could lead to children being removed. More information about the role of Social Services in domestic violence would be helpful, as would more information about Domestic Violence service such as SOLACE, and how these would link up with a refuge that gypsies and travellers feel most comfortable accessing. There were questions about accessing re-housing and the process for removing a perpetrator. Anger management courses were suggested.

### **Employment support**

Around 11 Traveller women had accessed childcare training over the last few years, with five women becoming level three qualified. One woman was a manager at a local setting. STAG now particularly promote health and beauty courses to younger women. Older women do not tend to work, but younger women were becoming more accustomed to taking up maternity benefits and returning to work part time, making good use of the extended network of aunts and grandmothers who were available to look after the younger children. STAG is funded through the Safer Southwark partnership to provide work support programmes and this includes voluntary work at Nell Gwynn Nursery School and East Peckham Children's Centre and driving lessons. This was specifically aimed at men, but women were benefiting most. This was a successful programme. Men wanted to undertake training to increase their chances of legitimate paid employment, but found it hard to access employment support, as they were reluctant to sign on, and so ineligible for many of the courses on offer. Economic stress increased the chances of domestic stress.