



Pregnancy Pal and Birth Buddy Initiative

# Someone in my corner

Evidence findings from a volunteer peer support initiative for parenthood, birth and beyond

"She (peer supporter) filled a gap. I thought there was nobody, so she filled it mentally and physically. If she had not been there that day (birth), I don't know, I can't think." Parent



This paper provides a summary of the evidence findings from the evaluation of Parents 1<sup>st</sup> volunteer peer support programme for parenthood birth and beyond carried out between 2010 and 2012. The full evaluation report is available on the Parents 1<sup>st</sup> website: [www.parents1st.org.uk](http://www.parents1st.org.uk).

Parents 1<sup>st</sup> is a Social Enterprise that carries out volunteer peer support programmes in local communities. It is part of a range of services reaching parents and families who may be disadvantaged as a result of social, health or educational issues. The local programme consists of four inter-related partnerships and approaches:

- ☆ One to one peer support from pregnancy to three months after birth
- ☆ Antenatal sessions
- ☆ Exercise sessions in the community
- ☆ A programme of outreach sessions

Parents 1<sup>st</sup> have developed and grown over the last three years through creating and establishing a range of partnerships and collaborations at both a local and national level. Parents 1<sup>st</sup> are committed to learning and evaluation.

## WHAT IS A PARENTS 1<sup>ST</sup> PEER SUPPORTER?

A Parents 1<sup>st</sup> peer supporter:

- ☆ belongs to the local community and has a shared experience
- ☆ is a mum, dad, grandparent or carer
- ☆ participates in intensive and accredited City and Guilds training
- ☆ is supported and supervised by Parents 1<sup>st</sup>
- ☆ volunteers their time
- ☆ bridges a gap between professionals and families
- ☆ is there to listen, support and not judge
- ☆ is in the parent's corner supporting their needs through empowerment

"What was on my mind was that I never made any false promises to her; this all comes under the training on boundaries – what the boundaries were, and what we can and can't promise." Volunteer

## WHO RECEIVED PEER SUPPORT?

In the period April 2011 and March 2012 (12 months): 104 two-hour outreach sessions have been held with 468 face to face contacts with expectant parents, of which 71 per cent were first time contacts.

50 parents were supported by a volunteer peer supporter. Just under half were parents in their first pregnancy, with twenty eight having had a previous pregnancy. Nine of those supported were single parents, ten were in a relationship with the father but not living together, thirty were in a relationship. The majority were white British with significant numbers of African, Eastern European and Asian ethnicities. About half of those supported were 25 and under.

78 parents accessed and completed the ante natal group sessions in Thurrock and Basildon. This included 48 mothers and 30 fathers. None of the mothers was aged under 20 years, 16 were from Black or Ethnic minority groups. The sessions are often held at weekends and the teachers thought there is the potential to increase the numbers attending the sessions and reach more vulnerable women through the development of the outreach service.

112 exercise sessions with expectant mothers have been run at 3 centres across South West Essex, and there were 59 new referrals.

# WHAT DID PARENTS RECEIVING PEER SUPPORT TELL US?

## Building Confidence

Parents reported an increase in confidence because they built a trusting relationship with the volunteer, they felt better informed and they were more in control of their pregnancy and birth.

## Addressing Isolation

Often this was the first time there was someone who they felt listened and understood their needs. In some cases trust was built between peer supporters and parents who were from different cultural backgrounds. The peer supporters encouraged women who were isolated to go to groups and meet other local parents. Parents found that having a focus in their week gave them a purpose to go out, rather than remain on their own.

## Prepared for Birth

Parents felt well informed about what would happen during their pregnancy and the birth, and this made them less fearful and feel they had more choices. It also assisted them in practical steps in preparation such as writing a birth plan or packing a bag.

"As an Asian woman when you are seeing a white woman you are thinking she's not going to understand me, she won't know my feelings and that is something that vanished." Parent

"After I stop seeing her, I know personally, I have improved in socialising with people and in having confidence – oh if they talk, I can actually talk back." Parent

"She (peer supporter) kind of helped to empower me. I didn't realise before with my other pregnancies, how much control I could have, how much I could be involved in my own pregnancy, in my own birth." Parent

### Increase in Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding rates for mothers receiving Parents 1<sup>st</sup> one to one peer support show a marked improvement on the national statistics and a substantial improvement on the South West Essex figures.

"When I was in hospital I needed support with breastfeeding then and I really wanted (volunteer) to come onto the ward because I felt comfortable with her." Parent

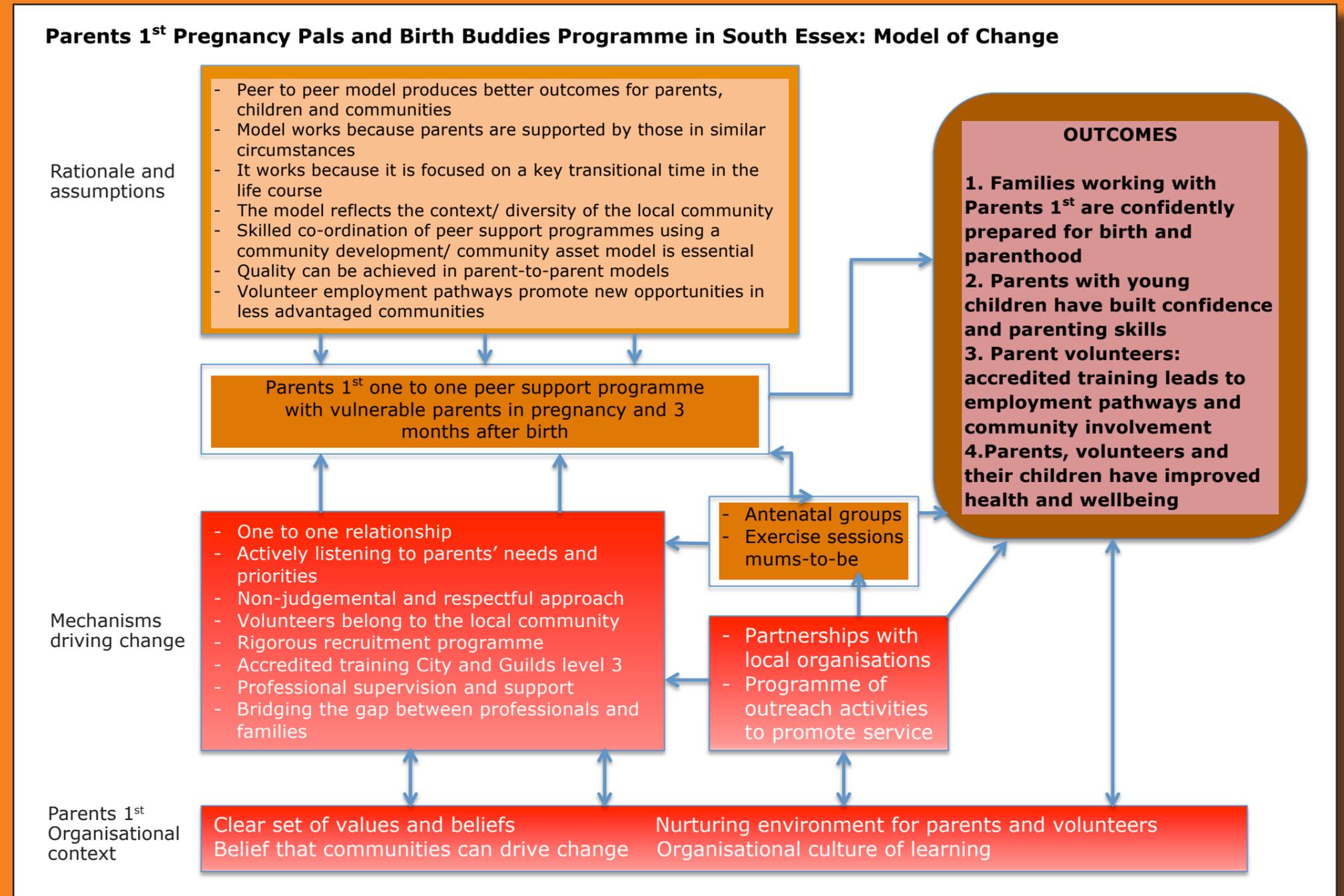
### Confident Parenting

There is good evidence that parents feel more confident in their parenting skills in the period following the birth. Parents developed their confidence in parenting through the relationship that had developed in pregnancy with the peer supporter.

"I feel more secure about what I am doing for the baby – even if I knew something, maybe I wasn't 100% sure that I was doing it right when the baby was here, and from her experience as a mum especially, she was always encouraging me – 'yes, you are doing it right' - and that helped me a lot." Parent

## THEORY (MODEL) OF CHANGE

The evaluation produced a Theory of Change, or change model, which summarises the changes that are brought about by the peer support approach, under which circumstances and why.



### WHAT IS DRIVING THE CHANGE?

In looking at what is driving the change we can shed light on the different elements that are required to make up a successful peer support model of delivery:

- ☆ One to one relationship
- ☆ A non judgemental approach
- ☆ Volunteers as part of the local community structure
- ☆ Bridging the gap between professionals and families
- ☆ Parents 1<sup>st</sup> values and beliefs
- ☆ Rigorous recruitment and training
- ☆ Supervision and support, including peer support
- ☆ An organisational learning culture

## WHAT IS THE IMPACT ON THE VOLUNTEERS?

The impact of the Parents 1<sup>st</sup> experience on the volunteers has given them new opportunities, helped them develop confidence and led to potential training or employment pathways.

"I've got a bit of a purpose now apart from being a mummy, which is a great purpose, but something else for me. I guess I have found my niche a bit.... I can see which direction I might try and go in when I go back to work." **Volunteer**

The partnership with the experienced NCT antenatal teachers is highly valued by the Parents 1<sup>st</sup> team and the volunteers and they are available to offer extra support and guidance.

## GETTING THE MESSAGE OUT THERE

### Scaling Up

Parents 1<sup>st</sup> has ambition to scale up beyond delivering small scale, local services and to increase its social impact at a national level.

The influence of Parents 1<sup>st</sup> work in the early years is increasing in spite of tough political and operating conditions in an austerity climate; Parents 1<sup>st</sup> are developing internally and its external influence is increasing in the UK. The current potential of Social Impact Bonds offers a promising way forward for future sustainability.

### Continuum of Support to Vulnerable Families and Communities

A number of structured service models are developing to support families and communities in the early years, and Parents 1<sup>st</sup> complements and supports these initiatives. Growth of Parents 1<sup>st</sup> will focus on the role of peer support volunteers and their unique contribution to supporting vulnerable families and communities in pregnancy and parenthood.



First cohort of Parents 1<sup>st</sup> Pregnancy Pal and Birth Buddy volunteers

## Collaborations and Partnerships

Parents 1<sup>st</sup> will continue to develop its partnerships and collaborations in order to maximise its impact. Partnerships with other third sector organisations working in the pregnancy and early years arena are essential and Parents 1<sup>st</sup> is well placed to facilitate and grow those partnerships.

## Building Sustaining Communities

Parents 1<sup>st</sup> have demonstrated the importance of engaging local parents in communities to support each other and how this can increase parents' confidence and ability to access local services.

## MEASURING THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT

The cost of rigorous recruitment and accredited training for a single volunteer is £1243. The annual volunteer retention rate is 70 per cent. Each volunteer provides intensive one to one support through pregnancy, birth and post-birth to an average of 3 vulnerable families per year.

The cost per mother receiving this support reduces the longer the volunteer stays. The cost is £207 per mother for volunteers staying for 2 years. A case study example of one mother supported identified 78 hours of volunteer input.

Parents 1<sup>st</sup> can begin to demonstrate the cost savings to statutory provision, private investors and the public purse through comparing their unit cost against a number of indicators linked to the social impact of their work. These compare the potential costs that are incurred through not investing in prevention and early intervention in the early years. For example:

## Breastfeeding

There was a marked improvement in breastfeeding rates for mothers receiving Parents 1<sup>st</sup> one to one peer support. Peer support which achieves a relatively high increase in breastfeeding rates saves the NHS money, because levels of hospitalisation of babies drop, breastfed babies grow up into healthier children and adults, fewer women develop breast cancer, and less has to be spent on infant formula<sup>1</sup>.

## Criminal Justice System

The evidence of potential cost savings to the public purse if secure infant attachments are developed between parents and babies from birth and during early infancy is overwhelming. The one to one support provided by Parents 1<sup>st</sup> volunteers during this critical time when relationships are developing between parents and babies is another key area of cost benefit. A young person who starts showing behavioural problems at age five, and is dealt with through the criminal justice system will cost the taxpayer around £207,000 by the age of 16.

## Mental Health<sup>2</sup>

Thirty-three percent of referrals to Parents 1<sup>st</sup> peer supporters were socially isolated causing low mood and feelings of depression. The support provided had reduced social isolation and built up new networks of social support. The costs associated with mental health problems in the UK are estimated at £105.2 billion. This represents an increase of 36 per cent since 2002–03 and an increase in the health and social care share of these costs of over 70 per cent.

## Welfare Benefits<sup>3</sup>

The average cost of an individual spending a lifetime on benefits is £430,000, not including the tax revenue. It cost £1243 to recruit and train a Parents 1<sup>st</sup> volunteer, and evidence in this report shows that becoming a peer volunteer was a pathway to employment opportunities. There is also potential for growth for Parents 1st to benefit vulnerable teenage parents graduating from the Family Nurse Partnership programme.

1 Jacklin P (2007) *Modelling the cost effectiveness of interventions to promote breastfeeding*, NICE Maternal and Child Nutrition Programme

2 Allen, G (July 2011) *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings The Second Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government*, HM Government

3 Allen, G (July 2011) *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings The Second Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government*, HM Government

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The evaluation was carried out by Dr Gillian Granville and Wendy Sugarman at Gillian Granville Associates:  
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