



Cumbria Maternity Services Poverty Proofing Case Study

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Introduction

"We are very aware of the inequalities in health for people who are living below the poverty line."

Children North East began the Poverty Proofing audit with North Cumbria Maternity Services to better understand how poverty impacts the experiences of people using maternity services and identify practical changes that could reduce barriers to accessing support.

The service covers a large geographical area, including parts of West Cumbria where significant deprivation and health inequalities exist. Hannah Pitchford, Wellbeing Midwife, led much of the work alongside colleagues across maternity services.

As part of her role, Hannah supports people accessing maternity services who are experiencing additional vulnerabilities, including mental health difficulties, substance misuse, young parenthood and neurodiversity. The team saw Poverty Proofing as an opportunity to better understand the lived experiences of people and families and ensure services were designed around their needs.

"When we got the opportunity to be part of Poverty Proofing, we jumped at it."

Understanding Poverty and Maternity Care

The maternity team already recognised the relationship between poverty and poorer health outcomes. However, the Poverty Proofing process provided a structured way to explore how financial hardship affected women and birthing people throughout their maternity journey.

For Hannah, the process went beyond identifying financial barriers and highlighted wider inequalities experienced by families accessing maternity care.

"Poverty Proofing lent itself to helping us see wider inequalities in our healthcare."

The findings informed the development of North Cumbria's wellbeing pathway, which provides enhanced support for people accessing maternity services who are facing additional challenges. Since the audit was undertaken, the service has broadened its focus to better support neurodivergent people and young parents and is developing targeted initiatives with migrant communities to reduce inequalities in access, experience and outcomes within maternity care.

Poverty Proofing Process

The training delivered by Children North East was described as engaging, practical and relevant for all staff groups.

"What I loved was that it was designed for everybody."

Administrative staff, support workers and frontline teams all took part and gained a greater understanding of how poverty can affect families' experiences of healthcare.

The training encouraged staff to see themselves as part of the solution, empowering them to respond directly to concerns rather than relying solely on clinical staff.

"They can deal with everything that comes their way."

Hannah felt the collaborative approach taken by Children North East helped create an environment where staff felt supported and able to explore challenges openly.

"It felt like you were part of our team."

Barriers Identified

Travel Costs and Access to Care

One of the most significant barriers identified through the audit was the cost of travelling to appointments.

People accessing maternity services who were experiencing financial hardship were sometimes unable to attend scans, triage appointments and other essential appointments because they could not afford the cost of transport.

"No one should be out of pocket for wanting to check on their baby."

The issue was particularly significant in a large rural area where public transport options can be limited.

Accessing Information

The audit also highlighted barriers relating to communication and digital access. People accessing maternity services reported difficulties accessing information through Badger Notes, particularly when trying to view and understand blood test results.

Staff recognised that while information was available, existing systems made sharing and documenting results challenging and time-consuming, limiting opportunities for discussion within busy clinical settings.

Wider Inequalities

The process reinforced the need to consider inequalities beyond income poverty, highlighting the barriers experienced by neurodivergent people, young parents, migrant communities and families from ethnic minority backgrounds within maternity care.

Addressing Barriers

Improving Travel Support

Following the audit, the service strengthened its approach to addressing transport-related barriers to maternity care.

Working closely with local charities and community partners, maternity staff can now access emergency funding for taxi travel in exceptional circumstances, helping people attend appointments when the cost of transport might otherwise prevent them from doing so. This support has enabled people to attend scans, access specialist treatment services and travel safely to maternity units when needed.

The service has also increased awareness of existing patient transport schemes and travel reimbursement options, ensuring that people receive information about available support earlier in their maternity journey.

“We looked closely at travel and developed solutions that provide much stronger support for women.”

Strengthening Community Partnerships

The audit reinforced the value of strong partnerships with third-sector organisations in addressing the wider challenges faced by families during pregnancy and early parenthood.

The service continues to work closely with local charities, including Together We Charity, Family Action and Maternity Action, to help people accessing maternity services and their families access practical support, financial advice, employment guidance and emergency assistance.

The local Baby Bank service has also expanded significantly in response to both the poverty proofing audit's recommendation and growing demand, increasing both its capacity and reach to support families across the area. The service provides essential items for babies and young children, including clothing, Moses baskets, cots, nappies, toiletries and bedding, helping to reduce financial pressures and ensure families have access to the items they need during the early years.

Improving Digital Communication

Changes have been made to digital systems to improve access to information, including enhancements to the way blood test results are shared through Badger Notes.

These improvements have reduced the administrative burden on staff while enabling people accessing maternity services to access information about their care more easily, supporting greater understanding and engagement throughout their maternity journey.

Developing New Care Pathways

The wellbeing pathway has continued to evolve following the audit.

Dedicated pathways have been developed to provide targeted support for young parents and neurodivergent people accessing maternity services. Future work will focus on addressing the inequalities experienced by migrant communities and ensuring maternity care is accessible, inclusive and responsive to their needs.

"We're trying to get all our pathways up and running and then embed them back into community midwifery."

Biggest Impact

For Hannah, the greatest impact of Poverty Proofing has been the increased confidence and ownership demonstrated by staff.

"I think it's the education and awareness for the staff."

Staff across the service are now equipped to provide practical support directly, whether that involves issuing food bank vouchers, signposting travel assistance or connecting families with community support.

"If somebody needs a food bank voucher, any of our staff can do that now."

Rather than waiting for issues to be passed to a midwife, staff feel empowered to act immediately and help families access support.

"They feel like they have ownership. If somebody speaks to them about it, they take responsibility."

Wider Reach and Conclusion

The learning from Poverty Proofing has influenced wider service development and continues to shape future priorities across North Cumbria Maternity Services.

Alongside embedding targeted support for young parents and neurodivergent people accessing maternity services, the team is now focused on improving experiences and reducing inequalities for migrant communities. The work has also

strengthened relationships between maternity services, community organisations and wider health and social care partners, creating a more joined-up approach to supporting people and families experiencing financial hardship.

North Cumbria Maternity Services viewed Poverty Proofing as an opportunity to better understand the realities facing people and families affected by poverty and inequality. Through training, engagement and service review, the process has led to practical improvements, stronger partnerships and a greater understanding of the barriers that can affect access to care. Most importantly, it has helped embed a culture in which tackling poverty-related inequalities and supporting families experiencing hardship is recognised as a shared responsibility across the service.

"Don't have any hesitations. Your staff will be really well informed, they'll feel they have ownership, and they'll be able to provide a greater level of support. Absolutely go for it."