

Between Us

Halton Borough Council's Creative Writing Programme for New Mothers

Evaluation report, March 2026

Dr Kerry Wilson and Dr Clare Maxwell, Liverpool John Moores University

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Creative Writing Programme for New Mothers described in this report formed part of the Halton Family Hubs offer, led by the Health Improvement Team at Halton Borough Council in partnership with the Infant Feeding Specialist Lead and the Start for Life Wellbeing Team at Bridgewater Community Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

The programme ran over a six-week period, commencing in February 2025, and included weekly 90-minute creative writing workshops¹ for two cohorts of women living in Halton. The first group was convened specifically for breastfeeding women, the second to provide more general postnatal mental health and wellbeing support. A total of 15 women² completed the programme in April 2025.

The project team then led a series of public engagement activities, including publication of the writing produced by both cohorts in an edited digital anthology³ – *Between Us* – and accompanying exhibition of selected pieces of writing, alongside professional portraiture (photographs) of participating authors. The *Between Us* exhibition was launched as part of a dedicated breastfeeding celebration event in Victoria Park Butterfly House and Garden, Widnes in July 2025 and then shared on a ‘pop-up’ basis in public venues across the borough, including Widnes Market and Runcorn Shopping City. The creative writing programme has also been proactively promoted via articles in the local press, including for example the Autumn 2025 edition of *Inside Halton*, and nationally via the Local Government Association⁴.

The full, formative evaluation of the programme was designed to:

1. Assess the impact of the creative writing project on participating women’s subjective wellbeing.
2. Consider changes in participating women’s individual and collective sense of agency and coping strategies in early motherhood.
3. Measure the impact of the creative writing project on breastfeeding continuation amongst participating women.
4. Identify the attributable qualities of the project and the creative experience in relation to providing responsive, personalised support to new mothers in the borough.
5. Explore the subsequent value of peer-led storytelling in supporting maternal wellbeing in the wider community.
6. Make evidence-based recommendations on the potential for attitudinal and behavioural changes in breastfeeding continuation in the borough via creative programming.

The following report summarises the evidence-based impact of the creative writing programme on participating women in Halton, with reference to research objectives 1-4, along with secondary impacts of the programme within the wider Halton community (research objectives 5-6). The evaluation was led by Dr Kerry Wilson⁵, Reader in Cultural Policy at Liverpool John Moores

¹ Designed and facilitated by Dr Rachel New.

² 8 women participated in the breastfeeding group, which met every Thursday morning at Kingsway Learning Centre in Widnes; 7 women participated in the perinatal wellbeing group, which met every Thursday afternoon (same day and venue each week).

³ Available here: [Between Us — Halton](#)

⁴ Featured case study: <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/between-us-powerful-exhibition-portraits-and-poetry-exploring-breastfeeding-bonding>

⁵ Corresponding author: k.m.wilson@ljmu.ac.uk

University (LJMU), in collaboration with Dr Clare Maxwell, Reader in Maternal and Infant Health at LJMU. A full summary of the mixed-method approach used throughout the formative evaluation research process is included as Appendix 1.

Headline impacts

Data show a profound impact on participating women's wellbeing and self-efficacy, with explicit, articulate and deeply expressive acknowledgement of:

- the value of the creative writing process;
- the therapeutic benefits of belonging to a supportive peer group of women;
- and the impact of the caring, responsive and highly skilled facilitation of the creative workshops.

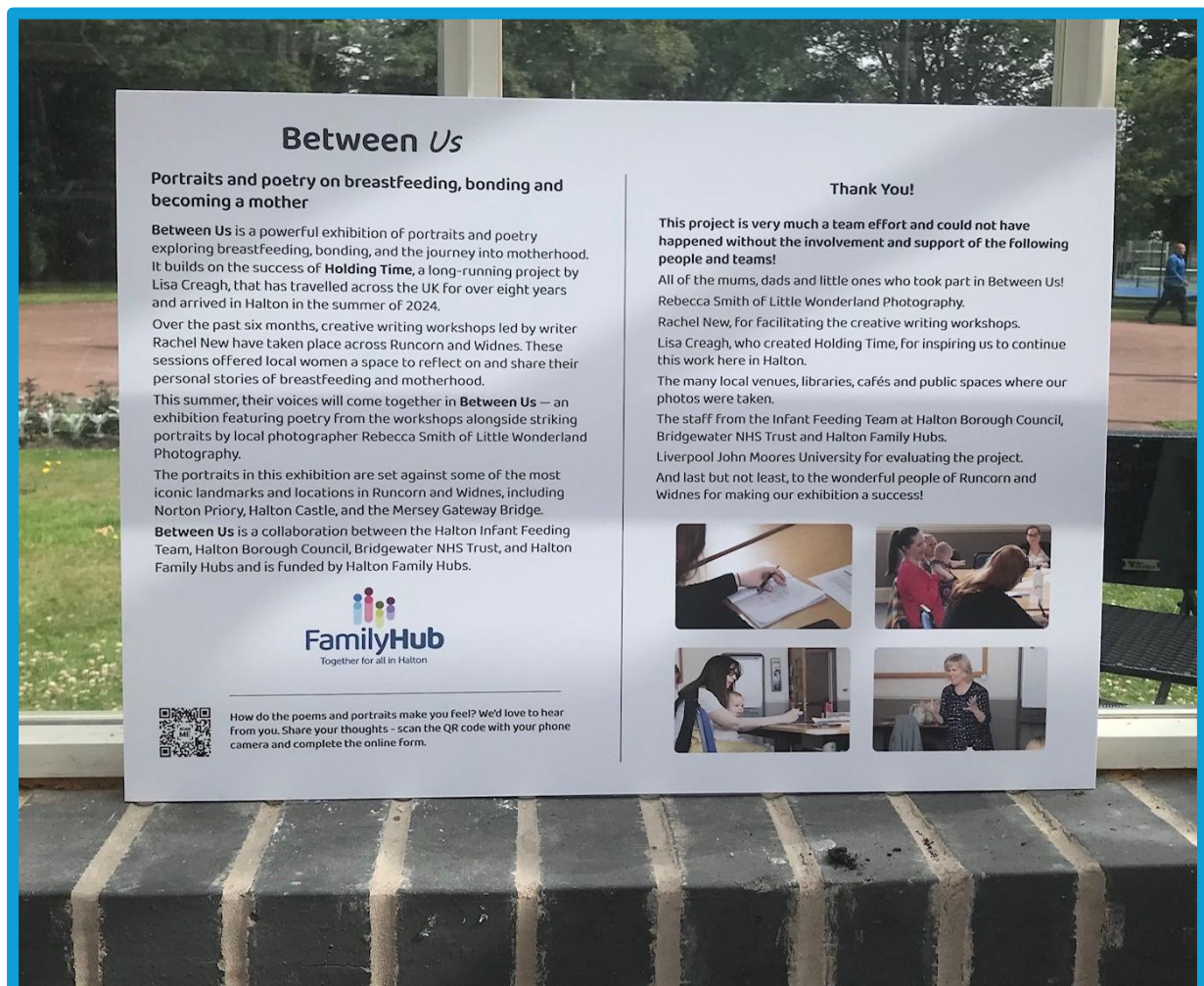
Key outcomes for participating women include:

- Experiencing various **positive emotions** after taking part, including a renewed sense of optimism; improved confidence, self-esteem and motivation; and proactive advocacy of the programme to other women.
- Increasingly enthusiastic, active and considered **engagement** in the creative writing process and subsequent public engagement activities.
- High levels of appreciation for the peer support, encouragement and validation offered by other group members and the programme facilitator, which has prompted the formation of new friendships and enhanced other **relationships** at home.
- Articulate reflections from participating women on the **meaning(s)** attached to and derived from the programme, in terms of its therapeutic value and impact; creative perspective-taking and reappraisal of personal experiences; cathartic qualities and inspiration to make positive lifestyle changes.
- A profound sense of **accomplishment** in relation to the writing produced and its public dissemination; personal wellbeing outcomes including renewed feelings of strength and pride; and a commitment to ongoing self-development.
- Specific **outcomes for breastfeeding women** include significantly improved confidence levels in relation to breastfeeding continuation and feeding in public; willingness to counter external pressures and expectations via peer validation and support; enhanced pride in feeding experiences and overcoming personal challenges; and proactive advocacy of breastfeeding in the community.

Key public engagement outcomes include:

- Audience members experienced genuinely **empathic and emotive responses** to the *Between Us* exhibition in real time, reflecting the relatability of its creative content.
- Members of the public agreed that the *Between Us* collection helped them to understand more about the realities of motherhood and helped to normalise challenging conversations, illustrating a **meaningful reciprocity** between writers and readers.
- With respect to empathic connections between writers and readers, audience members expressed an appreciation of the **aesthetic qualities** of the *Between Us* collection and exhibition, including professional portraiture, emphasising the value of creative expression in engaging community members.
- Members of the public agreed that peer-led storytelling therefore helps to **normalise and raise awareness** of breastfeeding, especially in public spaces and other everyday contexts.
- This helps breastfeeding women to feel culturally accepted and can potentially help to **boost breastfeeding initiation** and continuation in the borough.

2 SUMMARY OF EVALUATION RESEARCH FINDINGS



Participants felt a real sense of accomplishment in allowing themselves to feel and be vulnerable in their writing and group discussions, resulting in subsequent feelings of strength and pride at the end of the programme, both in oneself and in the writing produced.

PART 1 – The impact of the programme on participating women in Halton

2.1 Observing the Programme in Action

Evaluation researchers met with both groups of participating women during the first workshops on 27th February and were able to observe the workshops in full during weeks 4 and 6. The instantaneous impact of different writing activities (and full sessions) for group members was often palpable. As such, the research team is grateful to all participants, the programme facilitator and staff from commissioning services for their generosity in sharing their creative space with them. The opportunity to observe the programme in real time helps to present a more nuanced narrative description of its heuristic value and meaning.

Group characteristics

Participating women were of a similar age group – mostly in their thirties – and were visibly comfortable in each other's company throughout. There was a consistently amiable atmosphere, with participants showing an interest in each other and their babies and toddlers, with some babies present during the sessions. Women would help one another by holding younger babies at different moments, or playing with toddlers on the floor with the toys provided. This enabled women to focus on their writing at different times or to share thoughts and reflections with the group. Women would comfortably breastfeed babies during the workshops when necessary. There was a real sense of camaraderie at times therefore, with evidence of a gradual bonding process as the sessions progressed. This was helped enormously by the facilitator, who enthusiastically encouraged connections and conversations within the groups whilst being sensitive towards the needs and preferences of individual group members.

Topics of discussion

Individual reflections and group discussions were emotionally charged from the first workshop, with participants often becoming tearful when sharing examples of their writing by reading aloud and then expanding upon their individual experiences and concerns. Topics shared and discussed included those relating specifically to experiences of motherhood from multiple perspectives, including struggles with infertility; miscarriage; traumatic experiences of pregnancy and childbirth; peri and postnatal depression; babies' health concerns and medical treatments; genetic neurodiversity; and physical, social and psychological challenges with breastfeeding. Women were empathic towards one another during such conversations, and would share their own, similar experiences and challenges in mutual support.

The creative writing process would also trigger, in some cases, reflections and conversations on other difficult topics, including adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), harmful adult relationships and stressful family circumstances. These include for example early maternal and paternal abandonment; grief and bereavement; childhood sexual abuse and exploitation; relationship breakdown and involuntary single parenthood; and the complexities of blended families. Again, even in the most deeply moving examples, women would be supportive of one another, aided by the skilful, intuitive and compassionate responses from the workshop facilitator.

Through the creative (re)processing of traumatic experiences and memories, participating women in some cases were able to translate their personal learning and development into more positive and optimistic maternal intentions towards their own families, and themselves, moving forwards. For one woman really struggling with her baby's health concerns, including inherent feelings of maternal guilt, the programme is part of a suite of support mechanisms, reflecting its complementary value and potential in helping her to process those feelings of guilt via reflective perspective-taking.

Engagement with and response to creative process

Participants engaged in a variety of creative writing activities, including experimenting with different poetic forms (e.g. acrostic; haiku; using repetition), letter writing, and themed free writing (e.g. about identity). All engaged fully, where possible, in each activity during observed sessions, although participants would sometimes be understandably distracted by caring for babies, be experiencing low energy levels for different reasons, and express a lack of confidence in own writing ability for certain activities. In each relative case, the facilitator would listen carefully to any concerns and coach individual participants through the activity. The workshops were also supported by professional staff and colleagues from commissioning services, including those with expertise in community nursing, infant feeding, and health psychology, who would also help by playing with and looking after babies and toddlers.

Participants would openly critique and reflect on their feelings towards different creative writing approaches and activities, displaying an appreciation of and preference for different styles and techniques. The exercise on writing about identity, for example, clearly encouraged a shared, deep-dive retrospective moment on ideas of self throughout the continuum of girlhood, womanhood and motherhood, that noticeably changed individual demeanours and the collective energy in the room for the breastfeeding group.

Mapping learning outcomes

Researchers were able to observe in real time therefore, the therapeutic value of the creative writing programme for different women in different contexts. The full evaluation research design adopted an iterative approach, whereby research interviews with a sample of participating women (7 in total) enabled further exploration of the impact of the programme on their subjective wellbeing as mothers and breastfeeding women, in particular. The research interviews also used a critical incident analysis (CIA) approach, to help understand the unique impact and value of the programme as a creative intervention in women's health and social care. To this end, women were asked to highlight and reflect on any specific moments or creative activities that resonated strongly with them or were particularly impactful.

2.2 Reflections from Participating Women

Research interviews began with a conversation on women's families, social networks and professional lives, to help consider the impact of the programme *in context* according to the lived experiences of individual participants. There are several important contextual and environmental factors to consider when designing programmes to support women's maternal health and wellbeing:

Professional roles, responsibilities and identities

All interviewed women work in demanding professional or para-professional roles, in sectors including medicine, health and social care; public services including housing and education; global renewable energy; and broadcast media production. All provide a substantive income therefore for their families. Most were returning to work full-time following maternity leave, with three research interviewees also having an older child (aged 3-4) and one with an older stepson. One woman's second baby was just 6 weeks old when the programme started.

For some women, the return to work will involve irregular shift patterns and/or condensed hours; the need to be on call and work at short notice; and with no options for flexible or part-time working in two cases. One woman has taken a longer period away from her work in education sector to care for her (now) toddler and two older, teenage foster children.

Most are graduates and spent time living in different locations, including internationally, before having children. Professional roles and identities foster both a sense of pride and passion for participating women, and some challenges and internal conflicts when it comes to balancing such responsibilities with motherhood and family. This is especially true in the transitional period when returning to work after maternity leave, with associated feelings of guilt, stress and separation anxieties.

Families and relationships

Most interviewed women grew up in Halton or surrounding areas and have chosen to return and settle in the borough after moving away for study, work and travel in early adulthood. Most have family members living nearby, who feature prominently in women's day-to-day lives, including socially and in providing practical and emotional support. All are in relationships with most married, apart from one who is estranged from the father of her child and his family, which has caused considerable stress and insecurity.

One woman has moved to the area for professional reasons, with both her and her partner's families living some distance away in their hometowns. Another is local to the area, but her husband's family is also based in another region.

Support networks and community

The patterns of participating women's adult lives therefore affect the shape and development of support networks and communities, with friendship groups for example in different geographical locations and connected to different life experiences and phases. Another recurring feature is the changing nature of relationships with childhood friends and peers, or those friendships developed in formative years, despite being local to the area. Most women for example commented on having children 'later than' more long-term friends and other family members (i.e. at an advanced maternal age), meaning that there are not many members of their existing local friend and family networks currently with babies or younger children. This can be an especially challenging context for participating women who have experienced lengthy fertility treatment; traumatic pregnancies and childbirth; have babies with health concerns and are living with ongoing, related post-traumatic stress and anxieties.

All women appeared to be actively engaged with local community services, which is reflected by referral pathways to the creative writing project itself and via ongoing engagement with networked services and organisations.

2.3 Impact on participating women's subjective wellbeing

Understanding the everyday lives and circumstances of participating women helps to appreciate the relative distance travelled in their maternal health and wellbeing, after taking part in the creative writing programme. Emerging findings are summarised thematically below, using the five validated PERMA indicators⁶ of subjective wellbeing:

- Positive emotion
- Engagement
- Relationships
- Meaning
- Accomplishment

⁶ For more information on the PERMA wellbeing scale:

<https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/perma wellbeing.pdf>

Key findings relating specifically to the experiences of breastfeeding women are also summarised below, under the subheading *Positive breastfeeding outcomes*. Verbatim quotations from research interviewees are included throughout, annotated according to creative writing group and interviewee number.

A short, questionnaire-based standardised measure of subjective wellbeing, with items adapted from the PERMA wellbeing, General Self-Efficacy (GSE) and Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC) scales, was also administered at the start and end of the programme. This has facilitated a 'snapshot' expression of collective feelings within both participating groups, with data collected anonymously and analysed cumulatively to protect the identities of individual participants and sustain a trusting relationship with researchers. Survey data show for example an increase in mean scores for most survey items for the breastfeeding cohort (BFGp1), including notable increases in PERMA scores for feeling positive, excited and interested in things; GSE scores relating to facing difficulties and dealing with unexpected events; and PSOC score relating to parenting skills. A full summary of survey data analysis is attached as appendix 2.

Positive emotion

Although some extremely challenging topics, traumas and reflections were shared in workshop group discussions, interviewed women unanimously described the programme as a wholly positive experience. Once initial feelings of apprehension or uncertainty had been overcome, especially when discussing difficult experiences, all described a shared and renewed sense of optimism gained via realising their common connections and similarities. This is especially significant for those who had felt motivated to join the group through an acknowledged need to manage their emotional responses to current personal and family circumstances.

"I definitely found the first session quite difficult pairing up and telling each other your story and having to retell that person's story because... I was quite apprehensive... because with my dyslexia, [my issue] is my short-term memory. So I was apprehensive that I wouldn't be able to [relay] the other person's story. But I also found it just really... uplifting because even though it was difficult, I realised that a lot of the issues that I'd had, like I felt over [time], it's just me going through this or like, oh, I shouldn't feel this way. But I felt quite validated [by] other people, hearing other people's stories, that there was a lot of crossover with, like the issues that I was facing. And I'm still facing". Gp2 (1)

"...it's a lot more emotional than I thought it was going to be. I wasn't expecting to cry every time I read out a sentence! But it felt like a safe space to do it... I felt comfortable to do it. I wasn't, like, nervous to tell it, and I liked hearing other people's [stories]." BFGp1 (6)

"...when I [saw] the writing (opportunity), I thought maybe that's something different as well... Like an alternative way to get stuff out, because at the time I was like, so angry. I was struggling with being angry at everything... I found it really positive. Like I say, I feel very chilled after doing it." BFGp1 (4)

With reference to support for women's mental health and wellbeing, the programme was favourably compared to more conventional therapeutic approaches, including talking therapy and counselling. This was based on personal experience of both, in one case. Reasons given include the responsiveness and flexibility of the creative methods used and the impact of peer group learning and support.

"I've done some CBT in the past when we were struggling to conceive and had some talking [therapy] or some counselling, talking to somebody, through the fertility clinic and I would say it's been equally as helpful, if not more helpful than those things were. And the wait times for support outside of perinatal services are just horrendous, so I

think having things that people can access that are a little bit different and might suit other people more, because it's not a one-size-fits-all thing when it comes to mental health.” BFGp1 (5)

“I didn't want it to end. I would have loved to keep going... it's one of the best things I've done for myself... I think it has more of an impact doing it that way than like, therapy with a one-to-one counsellor because you open up more... you feel comfortable because you're talking with other people that are going through the same things, whereas a counsellor is doing their job.” BFGp1 (1)

This positivity is reflected in the extent to which interviewed women proactively advocate the programme to other women.

“Even if [other women] don't think that it's something that's gonna suit them, just give it a try. Because actually, there's so much that you can get from it, even if you're not a creative person or somebody who's done any writing since they were at school or any writing for fun, usually. It is really beneficial and you might meet some really lovely people.” BFGp1 (5)

“...we've already spoke to other mums that go to Parents in Mind because there's a mum... that's a breastfeeding mum as well as having mental health issues... she said it was just the timings for her didn't work out and she was a bit apprehensive. But the way that we've [described] it to her, she was like, ‘well, if they do another one, I'll definitely go on it.’” Gp2 (1)

Another significant example of the positive emotions felt towards the programme is that several interviewees didn't want it to end! For some women, their renewed energy and enthusiasm has translated into other positive lifestyle changes, including re-engaging with physical fitness activities and healthier eating.

“...part of me is like, I just wish it had been longer. I just wish I was still doing it because it was just [such] a nice thing to do.” BFGp1 (6)

“I'm swimming again... I like it when I'm feeling healthy and fit and I like feeling good about myself... you're building your self-esteem and making you feel better about yourself.” BFGp1 (1)

Engagement

Referral routes to the programme indicate a positive connection with existing health, social care and voluntary services in the borough, with women being sign-posted by their health visitors, via group activities at Halton Lodge Children's Centre, Parents in Mind Warrington and Halton, and the Lighthouse parenting programme. This reflects the importance and value of trustworthy recommendations within the community in encouraging women to take part, especially those with ongoing mental health concerns. The fact that this was an entirely new programme was an important factor for one interviewee, providing the opportunity for women to meet as a group for the first time rather than for her to join an existing programme where group connections are already formed.

“I was already with the Mindful Me group who obviously said [creative writing programme] was [for] people with mental health issues because I've had a lot of struggles with mental health since I was quite young. My parents were in a domestic abuse relationship. And I was bullied. I was quite overweight as a child, so I was bullied a lot... And then just had a lot of anxiety... [baby] is actually my second pregnancy. We had a pregnancy before, but we lost that baby. So there was a lot of kind of issues that I needed to unpack.” Gp2 (1)

“...a specific course where everybody was starting at the same time, I felt quite comfortable with because everyone was new... a lot of things you go to, everybody there already knows each other so it’s quite hard to integrate.” BFGp1 (3)

An important caveat to note here (and raised by one interviewee) is that knowledge of the creative writing programme was dependent on existing connections with or membership of other groups, potentially to the exclusion of women outside those groups who would have benefited from the experience. Other interviewees had first heard about the project via social media, including a (closed) breastfeeding Facebook group.

When describing their motivation to attend, three women mentioned that they had heard about (or had previously considered taking part in) the Holding Time⁷ project, which ran in Halton in 2024 and acted as a precursor to the creative writing programme. The positive reputation of the Holding Time project inspired and encouraged women to take part, reflecting an effective legacy of creative programming in the Borough. Women who were not able or did not feel ready to take part in Holding Time, for different reasons, valued and appreciated the opportunity to engage in another (similar) project at a more convenient and appropriate stage in their maternal journeys.

“...early on, after I'd had him last year... They were running the first workshop and I'd been speaking to [name] from the well-being team, and she mentioned it to me as something that she thought would be helpful for me at the time. But I couldn't physically get him out of the house at that point. We hadn't realised that he had a tongue tied and a milk allergy, so we spent a lot of time with him just screaming... I didn't end up going to that writing workshop last year, so when I heard that it was being run again, this time I thought it'd be a nice kind of full circle thing towards the end of my maternity leave... As a way to see if there was sort of unresolved feelings that I'd not had time to deal with in the busyness of the year.” BFGp1 (5)

All interviewees felt inspired to take part, to begin with, through a desire to reconnect with creative writing interests they had enjoyed as children or younger adults; to further explore their creative curiosities; and in one interviewee's words, to ‘use her brain again’ during maternity leave. Women described their gradual engagement with and appreciation of the programme as a creative experience, including how they were able to overcome any original apprehensions about their individual writing abilities and come to recognise their own creative potential. These step-changes in creative engagement were attributed to the skilled facilitation of the workshops and the ways in which participants were encouraged to explore and experiment with different writing techniques and personal preferences.

“I had always liked writing but it sort of got relegated as I got older, so it brought it back to me... I was a little bit nervous to begin with as I don't think I'm a natural writer that will sort of get published, I do it for me... but also, I just needed something where I could get out of the house and see other people.” BFGp1 (2)

“...it [was] even better than I'd anticipated, really. I was a bit nervous that it was gonna be, you know, because I'm not a writer. I'm not someone who's particularly creative. So I was like, well, am I doing something that's, I'm just going to feel really uncomfortable and not be very good at. But actually I found the way that Rachel led us through the different activities each week... Sharing little bits with one another, it kind of brought more and more out of me and by the end I would sit at home thinking ‘oh, I could write a little poem about this’ and if things would come into my head and I'd think, ‘oh, that would be something nice to write about.’” BFGp1 (5)

⁷ <https://holdingtime.org/2024/04/02/halton-family-hubs-network/>

The creative process also enabled a deeper exploration and sharing of personal experiences within the group, with interviewees acknowledging that this is not something they have experienced in other group settings, particularly those designed for parents but with an emphasis on providing activities for babies and children.

“...we were focusing on the fact that we were writing and we were given these writing tasks. But actually, it was making us think about things that we might have locked away for a while and not really thought about and then sharing that with one another.” BFGp1 (5)

“Things came out and you were like ‘where has that come from?’... very often you would start thinking about something and then go off somewhere else... 75% of what you had written would end up being about something completely different to what you had intended when you started... It helped you process a lot, so it was very much about not realizing the things that were on your mind, causing frustration or concern.” BFGp1 (3)

“You overthink it at first... but as it went on, you stop holding yourself back, especially with everyone else sharing their writing... there are no barriers, you just feel like you can share anything.” BFGp1 (2)

Reflections on the experience of taking part as a gradual process emphasise the value of the programme as a recurring, group-based activity. There appears to have been consistent and regular attendance across the six-week period in both groups, which is a marker of the programme’s impact in terms of women’s commitment. This is especially true given the emotional heft of the experience from the beginning, which some women were not initially expecting. They were subsequently able to appraise their own self-development as the workshops progressed, including overcoming initial inhibitions with group support and encouragement. One interviewee expressed sadness at the programme ending but had been inspired to join other groups and services in the borough⁸, as another indicator of effective sign-posting and integrated provision. Another interviewee went on to take part in other creative writing programmes at Kingsway Learning Centre⁹, which were flagged during one of the workshops.

“...we had to write a letter to, I think it was to ourselves. But then she got somebody else to read it [out] to us and it really hits you in the heart, I think... and I remember saying to Rachel, ‘you didn’t tell us we were going to be crying or needing tissues.’ And she said ‘if I’d said that, you wouldn’t have come’ and [she’s] right, I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t have been there.” BFGp1 (1)

“Having been through it, it’s a difficult thing to advertise in terms of what happened... when I look at it now, the advert’s not wrong, it’s just not specific... from week 2 really there was a happy coming together of people in the room, it was very supportive... Some of it was quite hard, when it was a particularly emotive piece, but again it was the same for everybody, you could see everyone going through it, so you didn’t feel like you were on your own.” BFGp1 (3)

“I think probably one that was memorable ‘cause it was quite challenging is the first time that Rachel set us the free writing task and I sat there and I thought, well, ‘I don’t know what to write’. I need to be told what to write. I don’t know what to share. And there was sort of... I don’t know if I [was] sort of inhibited or embarrassed to share whatever thoughts were in my brain. And then when everyone else started sharing their things, I thought actually, you know, that’s really brave that they’re talking about their innermost thoughts. And that helps me to think, well, everyone’s encouraging one another. There’s

⁸ Including for example Parents in Mind.

⁹ Including 12-week early years programme on how to write a children’s story.

no judgement. It's all really supportive. So then it made it easier for the subsequent task that we were given to feel like I could be more open, be more vulnerable and share things." BFGp1 (5)

"Obviously it was a six week course. I was just expecting to do the six week course... and then obviously I found it so useful and so beneficial, I was like quite upset when the last session [ended] but through the group it actually signposted me to other groups as well that are available locally." Gp2 (1)

Relationships

The social relationships formed between group members therefore have been significant as a positive outcome themselves, and in the ways in which they enhanced the experience of taking part in the programme in real time. This includes for example in providing active support and encouragement to one another during workshops, creating a welcoming and safe space for all participants. Women acknowledged the generosity and kindness shown in sharing their stories with one another. It has been incredibly beneficial for women to realise that they are not alone in experiencing their (similar or different) maternal challenges.

"I think we were very lucky to have such a lovely supportive group. Well, we could share things and feel like there was that support and no judgement or anything there. About anything. You know, everyone kind of felt like they were lifting one another up and encouraging each other to share more. So it always felt like a very welcome environment to talk about things." BFGp1 (5)

"I like the fact that you could bring your child with you, but there was always other professionals there, and obviously a lot of the mums just kind of helped and it really did become a community... there was tea, there was biscuits, there was chocolate." Gp2 (1)

"I think that sharing your stories, it helps other people like who maybe wouldn't naturally. Being forthcoming with us... if they hear that you are going through something similar, they're a bit more likely to speak to you about it and kind of lighten each other's load type thing." BFGp1 (6)

"...we've all got something that's going on. You know, nobody's perfect. It's just my journey was different to their journey, but it doesn't matter. We're all still trying to feed our babies and do our best, you know, be mums." BFGp1 (1)

The creative process therefore has explicitly facilitated a deep bonding experience, with two interviewees noting that this probably wouldn't happen in other social circumstances.

"If I had met some of the writing group in a different [context] I would probably think that they didn't have those struggles...being able to share that in a sort of safe space and knowing that people were having the same experiences, it just made things so much easier this time... he's not been an easy baby... he doesn't like to leave the house! I would have felt completely trapped by that if I hadn't attended the group." BFGp1 (2)

"It's very much opened my eyes to when people walk into a room, you very much make a decision about what somebody is like, so one of the ladies, she walked in and looked really confident, she looked really well put together, really comfortable in herself, and absolutely was the opposite when it all opened up... it was that reminder of people are struggling with things that they wouldn't necessarily show you when you meet in other ways." BFGp1 (3)

“There were things coming out in weeks 5 and 6 that obviously people felt comfortable enough to share and... I felt quite honoured that people felt able, with you there, to go through those processes. There are things that [one woman] had never shared before that now, as part of maternal mental health week, has shared publicly... so it's had a huge impact... She's been on such a short journey in such a short space of time... to be able to support somebody through has created a bond that you don't get from the usual [small talk].” BFGp1 (3)

It was especially encouraging and impactful at the time of conducting fieldwork to see these connections blooming into new, potentially long-term friendships. This was an especially beneficial outcome for the interviewee who did not grow up in Halton. All interviewed women mentioned keeping in touch with other group members, including for example via WhatsApp groups and by meeting up in person after the programme had ended. Linking back to the contextual information above on the limitations of women's existing support networks, some have bonded with other participating women through having children of a similar age and via their shared experiences of breastfeeding, which is a relational connection they don't share with childhood or longer-term friends. One mentioned their plans to develop this new friendship network into their own informal support group for new Mums in the community.

“...all the girls were really lovely... Like we've stayed in touch... me and [name] have stayed in touch because [she] only lives like, not far from me at all. Just like a few minutes away. So it's been nice for me... she's got a little boy who's older as well. Like just having someone with the same sort of situation and stuff.” BFGp1 (6)

“...you build friendships as well... we've kept in touch... we met up at Norton Priory Cafe and so that's nice because it's people that are on the same journey as you and [I would] never have met those ladies if it wasn't for that group... And it's trying to find people who are breastfeeding... My best friends I've known since I was a child, they know how passionate I am about childcare, they know that's my [professional] background, but all of them are really shocked that I'm feeding still.” BFGp1 (1)

“I actually keep in touch with all of the Runcorn based mums... I see them every week... we've also been discussing setting up our own Mums group. To like help other mums that feel like they don't have anywhere to go or anyone to talk to.” Gp2 (1)

Women also spoke of how the creative writing programme is helping to potentially improve relationships at home, via the sharing of written pieces with partners and other family members. One interviewee described its impact on communication with her partner and on her self-care strategies, acknowledging (perhaps for the first time) the need to care for herself before she can effectively care for others. In another example, the programme has encouraged a reconsideration of difficult relationships and of the misplaced burden of responsibility, guilt and blame upon women and new mothers.

“I don't know how often it will happen, but I would like to get back into writing on my own... I shared my [final] poem with [husband]... I don't know completely how he felt... there were a lot of life's moments in that poem, it wasn't the easiest of reads... I think it brought it all back to us... we've been through a lot together.” BFGp1 (2)

“I'd come home after every session and I'd read whatever I'd done in session that day to my partner. And sometimes it was like the only way of me communicating issues I was having. Just with one, not knowing that I was having these [particular] issues, but two, just because I'm one of those people that focus on other people more than myself, I try to support them so...I just kind of move past stuff so it kind of helped me prioritise me as well... Sometimes he would say he felt the same way, but didn't know how to verbalise it

as well, and sometimes it was that he didn't realise I was feeling that way and I feel like it has actually made our relationship stronger." Gp2 (1)

"...none of his other family have seen him for a year. It's quite sad. Because I've always gone out of my way to make sure everyone is [included] but... It's always the woman that gets, you know, like [the blame]... 'she's stopping him seeing him', but it's never ever been that case." BFGp1 (4)

Another woman commented on how the programme, and her positive response to it, had encouraged different observations and responses from family members.

"And my family have also said that they see a massive difference in my mental health, like my happiness... My mum said you're walking with your head held high instead of down low and I realised that maybe that was the, you know, the trauma... you've got weight on you, haven't you? And then when you've removed that people must notice it." BFGp1 (1)

All interviewees were unequivocal in their appreciation of Rachel as the programme facilitator, with the trust placed in her emerging as a key underpinning condition of the programme's impact and relative success. This included her ability to allay any apprehensions or concerns relating to writing ability; her compassion and empathy when leading the groups through difficult topics of conversation and women's emotional responses; her engaging coaching style; and ability to offer constructive, meaningful advice and guidance and 'get the best out of people'. This continued beyond the scheduled workshops, including one-to-one coaching and keeping in touch between sessions with moral support and encouragement.

"Rachel was amazing. She was, like, super encouraging and just put you at ease with it... didn't make you feel like you were shooting for the stars by trying to... write a poem. So yeah, she made it a lot easier." BFGp1 (6)

"Rachel was brilliant, she was so good at empathising with everyone... and bringing everyone out of themselves, right from that first exercise when we had to repeat each other's stories and I thought 'oh God, what have I got myself into'... but it set the tone of this is what it's going to be." BFGp1 (2)

"I would never, ever have done it without Rachel's support... She [noticed] I couldn't write in the session and then it didn't end there... we did a lot of work behind the scenes, so she just threw a message out. I think she noticed that... I was a bit emotional, and I couldn't write something. And she didn't just wait till the next week to then speak to me again. She sent me a message and it was [a] really nice message. And it was the fact that she never questioned me once... she just let me speak." BFGp1 (1)

Meaning

The programme generated additional meaning for participating women in using creativity to mark a particular moment in time in their maternal journeys, including for example writing pieces dedicated to specific experiences and aspects of motherhood. This was especially poignant for one woman returning to work after maternity leave who used her writing to commemorate that time with her baby. There was a shared sense that the programme created a metaphorical 'pause button' on busy and demanding everyday lives, enabling women to meaningfully reflect on such moments and experiences. The combined opportunity for reflection and commemoration therefore has been particularly powerful.

"I just feel like everything's a rush to the next step and I don't know whether it was because my maternity leave was coming to an end, but I felt like I really wanted to save that last bit of time where we were just off together, the two of us." BFGp1 (5)

“I just thought it would be nice to get stuff out in writing and I've been decorating my house and thought I might be able to write a poem for my son's wall.” BFGp1 (4)

This appears to have been made more meaningful by providing the opportunity to express these feelings and record memories *in writing*, more specifically. This has encouraged a deeper exploration of the meaning and significance of motherhood and other life events by participating women, including enhanced perspective-taking through critical distance and reflection. This includes making connections for the first time between different experiences and their emotional impact, such as the synergies between ACEs, miscarriage and subsequent fearful pregnancies, and the unpredictable chances of motherhood. One woman acknowledged that ‘being busy’ all the time may have been a deliberate but unhelpful behaviour in itself, with the programme providing the dedicated space and opportunity to confront some difficult experiences.

“I found it amazing 'cause... There was a lot of [writing] styles that I hadn't heard of or hadn't really well, like slightly out of my comfort zone, but I found them really, like freeing because... again obviously because the whole process was out of my comfort zone, we were tackling a lot of issues that I didn't even realise were issues, like obviously that I'm quite open in saying that like [baby] is a rainbow baby. But through the sessions I was then able to kind of unpack what that meant and realise that I didn't really enjoy my pregnancy as much as maybe somebody that hadn't lost a baby before.” Gp2 (1)

“I had cancer when I was a teenager, so he's quite a miracle, really. Well, I had cancer twice as a teenager. So I always think of it as a miracle to have, you know, at 40 and I think you know, I just picture him sat there all the time inside me, waiting to be born or something.” BFGp 1 (4)

“I think there's the things that you just don't think about day-to-day, 'cause you're busy living in the day-to-day and then when you start writing you have that time to process things and think about things more deeply. It's quite different to kind of spoken, if people ask you questions and you kind of verbally respond... I don't think you always consider it quite as deeply as you do if it's a written thing. I think each word is a little bit more considered when it's written down.” BFGp1 (5)

“I think it started with the time to just sit and think about yourself because you never do, and I know now like my life is so busy... And I wonder now, is that how I've sort of just done my life so that I don't have to stop and think about things?” BFGp1 (1)

In one particularly emotive reflection, an interviewee described reading one of her pieces aloud to the group, which encouraged a transient moment of togetherness that spoke to the shared experiences and difficulties of being a woman, not just a mother. Another interviewee spoke movingly about how the programme had helped her to reflect on how far she has come, and to reconnect with earlier significant, happy life experiences that had shaped and informed her values and identity as a woman.

“...when I'd finished reading it and Rachel was upset and everyone was a bit upset and everyone was like, ‘oh, yeah, that's a bit close to the bone’. I was like, OK, as women, I think we're just held to this societal standard, and we're just constantly beaten down and like not given enough credit for what we do... and it just felt like that kind of resonated with everyone... It's not nice to make people cry, but it was quite nice to think ‘OK, so it's not just me’... [it's] being a woman. And the things that you go through.” BFGp1 (6)

“The [writing] exercise on identity... not focusing on the baby as the thing that has brought you there... but thinking about the past and what you have achieved... how you feel about yourself... going back to a time in life where I was happy in myself... I

absolutely grieved when we left [place] because I felt I had left part of myself behind.” BFGp1 (2)

In this context, the fact that the programme was focused on the wellbeing of participating women rather than the development of babies and children (as reflected in *Engagement* section above), was very much appreciated.

“We do other baby-based activities... it’s just things that entertain a small thing but it doesn’t take a lot to be honest, so... it’s nice that it was something that you could go to with the baby but not be about the baby... for me, certainly second time around, you realise that they’re perfectly happy... it doesn’t [have to] stop life.” BFGp1 (3)

“When you meet new people, and people you know as well, when you have a new baby, the conversation is about the baby. It’s very rarely about you.” BFGp1 (3)

In considering the meaning attached to the programme for participating women, it is important to reiterate its value as a *therapeutic* creative writing experience. As such, there are multiple layers to the ways in which women (individually and collectively) experienced the process and the subsequent effects it has had upon them. Participating women acknowledged for example how the therapeutic qualities of the creative process had helped them to discover and appreciate their creative self as a means of rationalising difficult experiences and their emotional impact. This was described as “cathartic” by one interviewee in helping her to realise the root causes of certain anxieties. Going through this process with a peer group of like-minded women, and forming friendships through that therapeutic process, has also been especially meaningful.

“I thought maybe I’ll write a little poem, but it probably won’t be very good. And you know, I’ll have a nice time and I’ll probably meet a couple of people and you know it’ll be a nice way to just spend a few hours... But it was so much more than that, you know, it was the therapeutic side. It was discovering that creative side. And then creating something that I am really proud of and that I feel like has explored a lot of things I didn’t know were weighing on me... helps me to process them.” BFGp1 (5)

“... [we were] unpacking deep seeded trauma, but in the same way helping to process and move past the trauma. We [were] also creating I feel like long lasting friendships, that are deep friendships because we do still talk about very deep subjects as well.” Gp2 (1)

One woman was very eloquently able to attribute therapeutic outcomes to the incremental stages of the creative writing group process.

“Without the creative side of the process, there wouldn’t have been the same thought development... the creative side was the medium to allow everything else to happen... the conversation would not have gone to the same places [without] the process of reflection and personal writing, and then sharing that... you were writing for you and then sharing your thoughts, rather than having a conversation, and that’s a very different way of opening up... Sometimes [the writing] is quite obscure, but then when reading aloud and discussing, you can explore that more.” BFGp1 (3)

In another powerful example, the programme has supported one woman to re-evaluate her coping strategies in relation to ACEs, including sexual abuse and coercive relationships. She attributed this directly to the therapeutic qualities of the programme, including personal storytelling and peer support.

“I was groomed when I was 15 and I ended up staying in that relationship for 7 and a half years... I kind of learned from that relationship and things like that, but to me it was

about protecting myself and keeping things in, and kind of just boxing everything off, moving on... it's done. Finished. Move on. So I never really tackled these things. And then it was only during this workshop I realised...watching all these women crying and telling their stories... I actually learnt along the journey that being strong wasn't boxing it in and keeping your emotions in." BFGp1 (1)

With the ongoing impartial support of the programme facilitator, she has been able to acknowledge the lifelong burden of guilt and subsequent behaviours related to her own ACEs, which represents a major therapeutic breakthrough for her. She is now engaging with other ACE support services because of this breakthrough.

"I think I just want to, kind of, make up for what I've done in the past all the time... and I want to be this great daughter. And you know, my son's perfect and my life's perfect... I was reflecting like through my journal... with Rachel and she was really supportive of that and she didn't push me... I felt like I could trust her. And I opened up about the abuse." BFGp1 (1)

"...it's changed my life really, because even though it's a six week course, it was like... Once I realised things from the past are affecting the things I'm doing now, I was able to [start] making those changes and... now I'm getting help through... a rape and sexual abuse [service]... So I'm having some therapy now for that." BFGp1 (1)

Accomplishment

Participants felt a real sense of accomplishment in allowing themselves to feel and be vulnerable in their writing and group discussions, resulting in subsequent feelings of strength and pride at the end of the programme, both in oneself and in the writing produced. All women interviewed agreed at the time that they would be happy for their writing to be shared publicly (e.g. in an exhibition space or digital anthology). This represents a big step change in confidence and self-awareness, especially for those women who were originally quite apprehensive about their creative writing abilities. One woman reflected on the emotional energy and resilience required to engage fully in the process and what that has meant for her own self-development. Another woman recognised a positive attitudinal change in her capacity to communicate her feelings and prioritise her own needs.

"It makes you feel quite vulnerable to have your inner thoughts out in the world for other people to judge. But the fact that we've gone through that process... Week by week, I felt like actually I've made something that I feel quite confident in. I'm quite proud of. I didn't think I'd get to that point." BFGp1 (5)

"I wanted to do more things in the time that [child is] at nursery... something a bit more productive and for myself... But the first couple of weeks I was drained when I went home, you know, because you've been crying... emotionally, it was quite tiring." BFGp1 (4)

"I think it's made me more kind of open about my feelings and verbalising how I feel, so I feel like I've used the tools... there was maybe two or three sessions where I didn't take my daughter... And I felt guilty that I was like, no, I need this. It actually became 'me' time." Gp2 (1)

One of the interviewed women spoke candidly and optimistically about her dyslexia (first diagnosed at university) and how the programme complemented her preferred learning styles. Another interviewee was undergoing autism assessment and testing, following the concentrated presentation of certain symptoms and indicators in pregnancy. This is another important

contextual factor to consider in terms of how neurodiverse new mothers manage their emotional wellbeing and communicate their concerns.

“I found the acrostic [poem] exercise really useful. Again, because of my dyslexia... Sometimes I struggle with where to start, but with having the letters to start each kind of phrase, I found that really like useful.” Gp2 (1)

Touchingly, women described feeling inspired by one another’s writing, in another example of the universally empowering qualities of the programme.

“...it's like inspiring, isn't it? Gives you a little food for thought and think, ‘oh, I could write something like that’ maybe.” BFGp1 (6)

2.4 Positive breastfeeding outcomes

One of the most significant outcomes for participating breastfeeding women was a renewed sense of validation and confidence in breastfeeding continuation, especially for those women with older babies and toddlers. This has been effectively facilitated via creative perspective-taking (described in *Meaning* section above) during the writing process and by the peer support provided by other group members.

“Just like being able to get things out of the system that were like stored... Look at things from a different point of view and I feel a bit more confident. There's also that matter of I was feeling pressured about stopping breastfeeding and I just came away thinking, ‘well, I don't anymore’.” BFGp1 (4)

“I think it's made me more proud of the fact that we've made it to this [point] and kind of seeing... there are a couple of mums who are still breastfeeding with older children. It's made me feel less pressure to think about weaning any time soon. Because some people have started asking about, you know, when are you going to stop feeding? It was nice to feel actually, because you don't see many people feeding older babies. It was nice to see and feel that actually there's people there that have been through this. And I've got that support and if I did have questions, I feel like I could go to them and just say, oh, God, what did you do in this situation? It was really nice.” BFGp1 (5)

“I actually was thinking of weaning him... I'm not putting a time on it. I'm just going to, I don't know when I'll stop. There's got to be a stop at some point, but I'm not going to put any pressure. I'm just going to see how we go... it's hard because you don't see anybody feeding older children.” BFGp1 (1)

One woman had come to understand how continuing to breastfeed her two-year-old son was helping to manage his neurodiverse behaviours and tendencies, highlighting the different contextual reasons for (and benefits of) continuation. She has joined a dedicated group called Breastfeeding Beyond to continue to engage in peer-led support.

“And when I breastfeed him, it's the only time where he just completely melts into me and he can stop, and he touches me, and I find that I feel like... feeding him for this long has really helped him with that because he didn't like hugs or being touched or holding hands... he gets really overwhelmed... And I've tried everything to calm him... to a point where he's just hitting me in the face... and like that he just completely melted into my arms and snuggled in and it fixed it straight away.” BFGp1 (1)

Women subsequently feel more able to absorb, filter and reason with external attitudes towards and expectations of them as breastfeeding mothers, especially regarding feeding older babies

and toddlers and in relation to feeding in public. This includes managing the expectations of others, including pervasive stigma and critical judgement; and managing expectations of oneself, especially when faced with entirely unrealistic, performative representations of motherhood and breastfeeding on social media.

“I was feeling like I was under pressure to wean him off... Just generally... Outside people in society, but family as well... Family [saying] ‘oh, we need to come off that’ in a joking way, but... People just don't think... people are [not] used to seeing older kids breastfeeding, so they're like, ‘oh, God, why [are] you doing that?’... I feel more confident when people feel funny about it. I feel more confident. Like explaining to them kind of thing.” BFGp1 (4)

“...the problem as well is 'cause it is [so] hidden... you've got to be so brave to come out and do it because... I don't think it's the fact that I'm feeding him [at] that age... It's the comments, like some of them are so hurtful, like some of them are awful.” BFGp1 (1)

“It's rare to see somebody breastfeeding, it's even more rare to see somebody past 6 months... [older child] fed in the day until he was 2, 2 and a half... I was very aware of people looking at that point. When you've got a baby, people look and then look away. When you've got a toddler, there's definitely judgement there... I think it's quite sad and comes from not knowing other people who are doing it.” BFGp1 (3)

“I think especially in my line of work, like when I had [older child], there was a couple of actresses who had babies at a similar sort of time, just like months apart and stuff and they'd be on Instagram... I remember one of them, she was like breastfeeding with a glass of Prosecco and just like out and about, just loving life. And I was like, ‘oh, God, unfollow, mute’... I just think that I can get so easily wrapped up in that and seeing other people [online]... that to actually meet real people and have real conversations was like a breath of fresh air.” BFGp1 (6)

One interviewee spoke movingly about her own breastfeeding challenges, including a phobia of breastfeeding in public linked to the condition Tokophobia; a fear of childbirth that also induces anxieties around undressing, being naked and other medical examinations. This is a deep-rooted fear for this woman, associated with childhood experiences of sexual abuse. Through the shared creative process, she had begun to reconcile the impact of prior experiences on self-limiting behaviours and reconsider her feelings towards feeding in public.

“I realised that the [fear of] nakedness was impacting my breastfeeding journey because I fed [son] hidden away. For 2 and a half years, you know, in toilet cubicles and in the snug [at home]. I shut the door... and then you see all these women just feeding. And I was thinking, ‘wow, they're amazing.’ They can do it. And I know now that that was the fear of exposing my body in front of people rather than being embarrassed to feed [him], if that makes sense.” BFGp1 (1)

She is now proactively feeding in public and focusing on the positive aspects of this experience, for herself and her son.

“I've been feeding my son in public, which I've never done... because he told me that he could hear the birds and he really liked it... just hit my heart so much so I fed him on the beach the other day. I fed him at the park. I've just got, like, a completely different mindset... and know that I wasn't protecting myself doing these things. I was more hindering myself and my family. The things that I was doing were not protecting me. It's changed my life for the better.” BFGp1 (1)

Another woman spoke passionately about the programme being available to more breastfeeding women, including those with children of different ages who may have had different breastfeeding experiences with each child.

“I almost think it should be mandatory... the time in which you do it probably would vary depending on what people have gone through... I found unpicking things that had happened with [first child] very helpful, so even four years later, going through that process was helpful... there was evidently things that were still wrapped up in it that I hadn't closed off properly... I was still putting parts of his feeding journey in the writing rather than just the one that I'm on at the moment. I don't necessarily think it's just for those who have got small babies.” BFGp1 (3)

Women subsequently communicated a sense of pride in their own breastfeeding journeys, especially those who experienced immediate, post-delivery challenges and barriers, including babies needing neonatal medical treatment and care. Participating women were subsequently enthusiastic about acting as breastfeeding advocates in their own networks and communities, through their enhanced understanding of the value of peer support and validation. One woman for example expressed frustration at the lack of support for breastfeeding women in the workplace, especially when working irregular hours. She has now become a volunteer with the infant feeding team, helping to promote breastfeeding and create breastfeeding friendly workplaces with local businesses. Another woman described feeling compelled to support a friend if they chose to breastfeed, and to support their own daughters if they have children in the future, reflecting the potential intergenerational reach and impact of the programme.

“You just don't see it and can start to feel abnormal... It would be great to see it more... I don't know if people aren't doing it [at all] or just don't feel comfortable in public... apart from in baby groups, I don't think I've seen anyone, other a friend, feeding.” BFGp1 (2)

“I'm really proud that I've managed to [breastfeed] 'cause we did have challenges with it and you know, challenges that I didn't even realise that we were having. I'm proud that we've made it to this point. Still breastfeeding. And I think it would be great if other people did feel encouraged to try it. Because it's not easy, but it is worthwhile, I think.” BFGp1 (5)

“I think I mentioned in one of the groups, even like workplaces, I spent a good year pumping milk in my car on my break because I don't really have anywhere in the hospital [at night]. And I think that's quite sad, isn't it? Like nowhere comfortable just... and I just purely pumped at that time for comfort. Because obviously I couldn't last a whole 12 hours. I didn't keep it, but I've heard stories of other like professionals in work who would have a freezer box in the car and they would keep the milk in that. And I think that's so sad that they've got nowhere.” BFGp1 (4)

“...if [friend] does manage to have another baby and she does try and [breastfeed], I would try and be so supportive of that and try and help her so much... help her through it. And I always think now, like, if the girls go on to have babies... I wouldn't push it on them. But if they were like, I think I want to give breastfeeding a go, I would be like 'OK. I can help you with this'.” BFGp1 (6)

The peer support offered by group members therefore has been especially valuable for members of the breastfeeding group. One interviewee had struggled with feeding her older child and was now experiencing similar problems with her second baby, reflecting a legacy of maternal guilt and trauma. She had been fearful, to begin with, that existing feelings of demoralisation would be exacerbated by meeting other women in the group who had adapted seamlessly to breastfeeding and found it comparatively easy. Rather, she took a great degree of reassurance and validation

from women sharing their own challenges and disappointments. These feelings were shared by another group member who was experiencing breastfeeding difficulties for the first time with her second baby, after having a relatively easier time with her first child. Adopting another perspective, participating women described feeling empowered by their breastfeeding capabilities, particularly in the context of difficult perinatal experiences where they had felt a loss of control over events and outcomes. These feelings were used to positively encourage and galvanise other group members.

“I had a rough breastfeeding journey with my first and I'd really hoped that this would be different this time around and it has been different, but it's been similar as well... and I just thought it might help with some of that... my concern with most things breastfeeding related was that I was going to go and that everyone there would be like, ‘yeah, I've had a really easy breastfeeding journey. They came out of the womb and latched straight away’... But to be fair, all of the girls have struggled... Like it was, it's almost kind of like a relief, isn't it... But when you're in the thick of it, you just think everyone's life's easier, don't you?” BFGp1 (6)

“And I think for us it, it's something that or for me, I found it helpful in itself because we did have such a rough time at the start and [breastfeeding] was something that I was then really focused on, like a really positive thing that I could do... that felt like I was making a positive impact in that first week when otherwise I felt quite helpless... because we had a lot of expectations about what life was going to look like trying to have a baby and then having a baby and breastfeeding was the only bit that I felt like I could still cling on to, that could go how I wanted it to.” BFGp1 (5)

Women in the breastfeeding group continued to provide moral support to one another when experiencing feeding difficulties, illustrating the potential longer-term impact of the programme on breastfeeding continuation and behaviours.

“I was actually on only way to feed him in the toilet and I messaged the group... cause we've got a group chat and he was having [a] meltdown and I couldn't do anything, my husband couldn't do anything and he was getting more and more worked up and I offered him the milk... but I was on my way to the toilet cubicle to feed him like I would normally do... And it was after that I thought, ‘no, I'm fine.’ I can feed him anywhere. Nobody even noticed... I would never have done that. It was only because I was thinking of the group and what we talked about and it actually makes me feel sad that I was feeding him in a toilet cubicle, you know, in the past.” BFGp1 (1)

Another woman also shared her difficult experiences as a breastfeeding woman in the workplace, highlighting the potential value of the programme in relation to public health messaging and campaigning, and other longer-term legacies.

“I didn't prepare at all for going back to work... I went from on demand feeding to nothing at all. My workplace is completely open plan, so other than the boardroom, there isn't really anywhere to pump, so I ended up sitting in the car. Sometimes I had long days with evening meetings, so it just got really challenging.” BFGp1 (2)

PART 2 – The response from communities in Halton



“As a mother, I felt seen, my own experiences reflected and validated in the words and images. It reminded me of the power of connection and how these shared stories can uplift, validate, and inspire.”

Researchers are grateful to the project leadership team for their inclusive design and facilitation of the public engagement phase of the programme, enabling an integrated approach to data collection as part of the full evaluation process. This included the co-design of a short, online survey, designed to gauge public responses to the published digital anthology and exhibition spaces, accessed via a QR code. The survey also included an invitation for respondents to participate in a follow-up interview. A total of 15 survey responses were received, and follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with 3 members of the public on a voluntary basis (see appendix 1 for more information on methodological approach and design). The lead researcher also attended the breastfeeding celebration event at Victoria Park in July 2025, enabling participant observation of public engagement with the *Between Us* collection in action.

2.5 Engaging with women's stories

The exhibition launch event in July 2025 created a significant opportunity for participating women to meet again in person and publicly share their creative writing, alongside their invited families and friends, for the first time. The event was hosted by the programme's lead partnership team and attended by other Halton Borough Council and local service representatives. The glass butterfly house and garden provided a welcoming, accessible and inclusive space, with activities for children including story time facilitated by a Halton Libraries team member and performances by a local music group enhancing the celebratory nature and tone of the event.

Selected examples of women's writing were printed and exhibited on individual hardboard panels, along with enchanting images of authors taken by local professional photographer Rebecca Smith¹⁰ on location in different outdoor areas across the borough. It should be noted that the *Between Us* digital anthology, portraiture and accompanying exhibition panels were produced in a relatively short space of time between women's completion of the programme and launch event and to a very high professional standard. This has boosted participating women's feelings of accomplishment and pride, and the individual and collective meaning attached to the programme. The team should be commended therefore for the quality of the visual creative outputs produced and their ongoing commitment to both the women who took part and to the delivery of high standard creative interventions in the borough.

When observing public engagement with the exhibition, people took the time to fully read and engage with women's writing, often using the space to just stand alone and consider the words independently. Conversations between different readers, including those who were attending together or meeting for the first time, emphasised the relatability of women's experiences and their written expression, illustrating the contemporaneous power of the exhibition in connecting with people and places. The images of women in recognisable spaces helped to root the exhibition in the Halton community, creating an extra sense of common ground and togetherness between authors and readers.

Participating women were also given the opportunity to read their published writing aloud at the launch event, to a live audience, using a microphone stand in the garden space outdoors. This represented a milestone moment for them, which was embraced positively by all those who took part. For audience members, including close family and friends, this gave an added poignancy to the event. This generated emotional responses, with audience members becoming tearful at times. Individual and collective reactions to live readings were encouraging, kind and respectful, with each reader receiving a round of applause and being audibly commended on their writing. Such feelings and expressions of genuine empathy between writers, their readers and audience

¹⁰ <https://www.littlewonderlandphotography.co.uk/>

members are a key outcome, which help us to understand the value of peer-led storytelling in health and social care contexts.

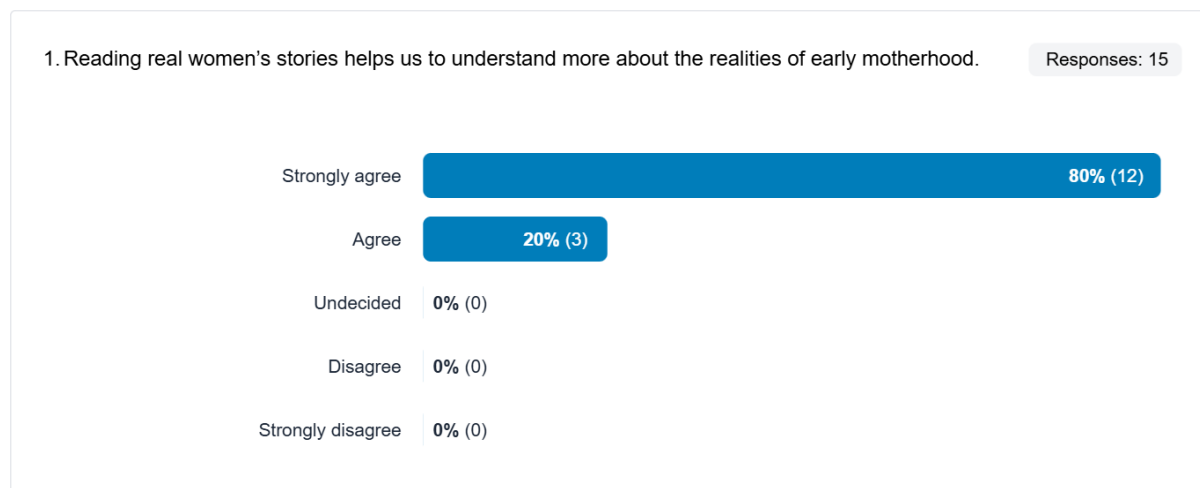
Comments shared by public engagement survey respondents who attended the celebration event further help to illustrate its empathic impact:

This was a beautiful event. I was in tears by the end of the poetry reading. These women have verbalised so many difficulties as parents and as people who choose to breastfeed. Well done.

Wow! Listening to the poetry and seeing portraits today moved me deeply. They captured the raw beauty, vulnerability, and quiet strength of the maternal journey in a way that felt both intimate and universal. As a mother, I felt seen, my own experiences reflected and validated in the words and images. It reminded me of the power of connection and how these shared stories can uplift, validate, and inspire. I believe this work will resonate with so many others too, offering comfort, courage, and a sense of belonging in the ever-evolving experience of motherhood! Thank you!

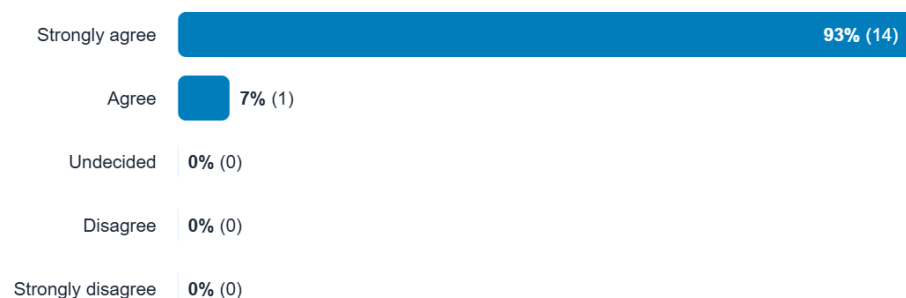
2.6 The impact of relatable storytelling

Public engagement survey data show a range of positive public responses to women's writing, which further emphasise the relational, empathic qualities of the programme and the *Between Us* creative outputs. Survey respondents were unanimous for example in their agreement with the statements that 'reading real women's stories helps to understand more about the realities of early motherhood' and 'reading real women's stories helps to normalise challenging conversations about early motherhood'. This complements and substantiates participating women's own reflections on the value of the peer-supported creative writing experience itself in validating their own experiences and concerns as mothers, indicating the reciprocal value between writers and their readers.



2. Reading real women's stories helps to normalise challenging conversations about early motherhood.

Responses: 15



Survey respondents were also able to appreciate and articulate the value of creative writing specifically, and the aesthetic impact of the programme's creative outputs, as the following shared comments suggest:

Creative writing is an amazing way to release emotions and thoughts and share them with others. Telling our stories helps others not to feel alone and builds bonds with other mothers.

Beautiful exhibition - each mother's experience is so different and it's inspiring to see their confidence with such wonderfully captured images.

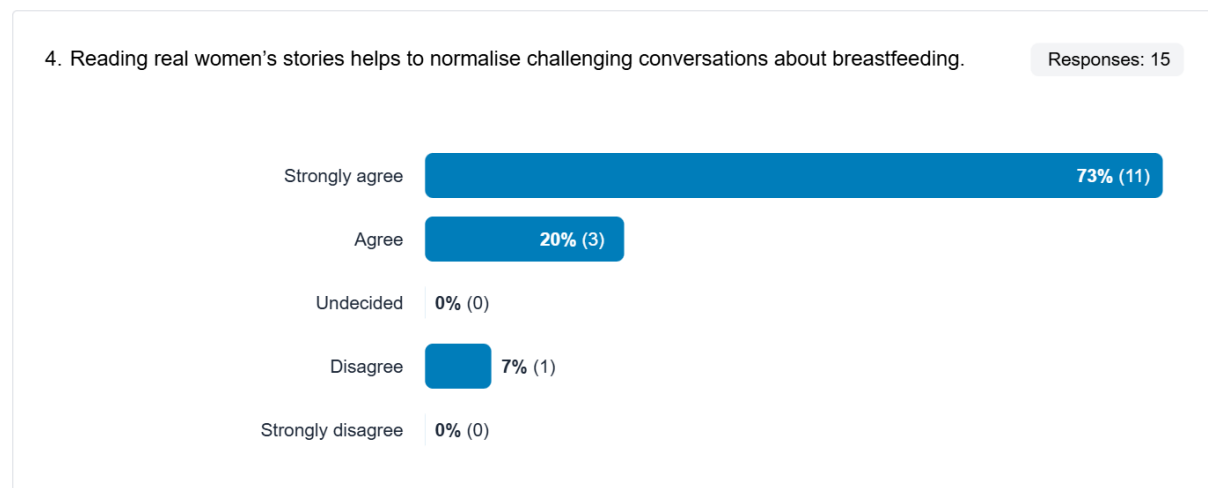
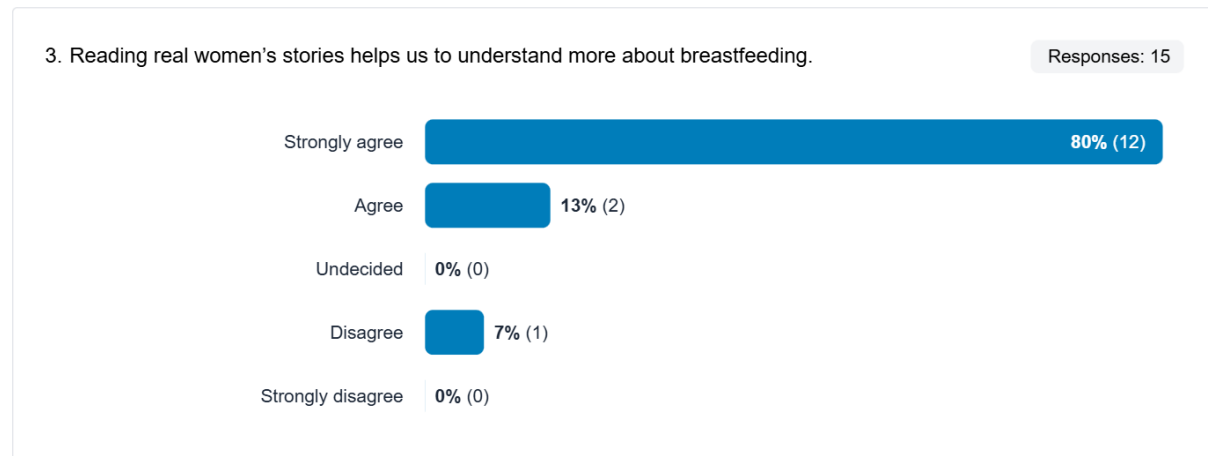
Research interviewees also offered interesting perspectives on the original contribution of the *Between Us* collection and exhibition in a public engagement context, reflecting on its capacity to prioritise and promote women's health using a 'different lens'. The women interviewed in this phase of the research described having an existing vested interest in women's health, both professionally and personally, and saw the collection as part of a bigger movement around this. They felt it helped to bring attention to women's health in an innovative but inviting way, including for those members of the public for example who would not usually engage in reading for pleasure or necessarily attend exhibition spaces. Interviewees believed that women's health was gaining momentum as a priority and that more innovations such as this were needed to strengthen core messaging.

2.7 Creating a culture of breastfeeding knowledge and support

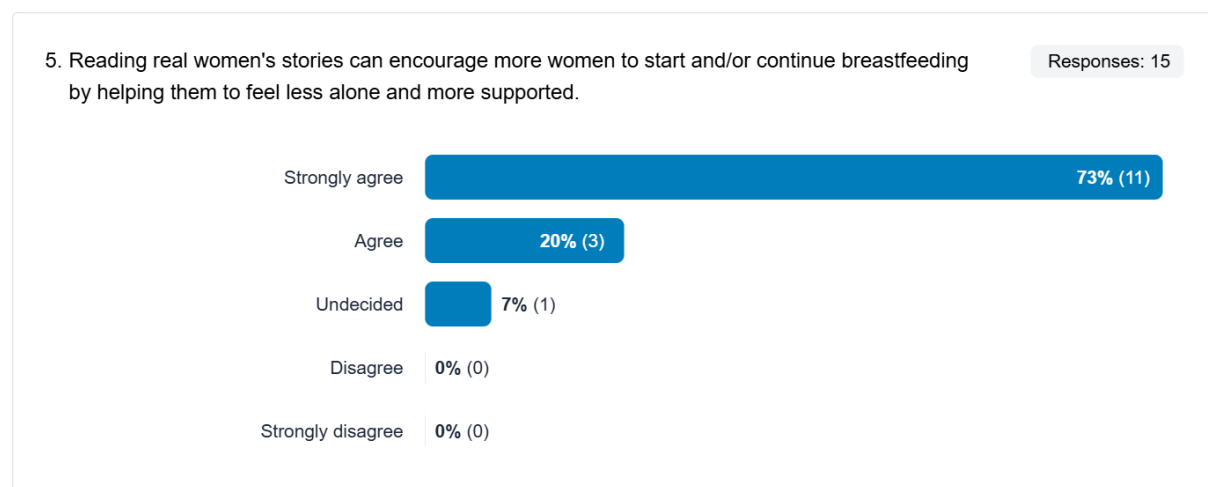
One of the key themes consistently emerging from the three research interview conversations held in the public engagement phase of the evaluation was the perceived 'normalisation' of breastfeeding by community members. Whereas women usually describe a sense of being 'othered', or considered unusual for choosing to breastfeed, the *Between Us* collection and shared spaces showed breastfeeding as being a natural, everyday example of feeding your baby, thus helping to normalise it as a routine maternal act. The images of women feeding in natural, outdoor environments further helped audience members to interpret breastfeeding as 'natural, spontaneous and beautiful'.

On the subject of breastfeeding, survey data show a slight disagreement with the statement that 'reading real women's stories helps us to understand more about breastfeeding', albeit with 12

out of 15 people strongly agreeing, and one person also disagreeing with the statement that 'reading real women's stories helps to normalise challenging conversations about breastfeeding'. Most respondents however agreed positively with both statements.



Regarding breastfeeding initiation and/or continuation, 11 out of 15 respondents strongly agreed with the statement that 'reading real women's stories can encourage more women to start and/or continue breastfeeding by helping them to feel less alone and more supported'.



One interviewee gave an interesting comparative insight into different cultural attitudes towards, and expectations of, breastfeeding women. She explained that she was from Hong Kong, had

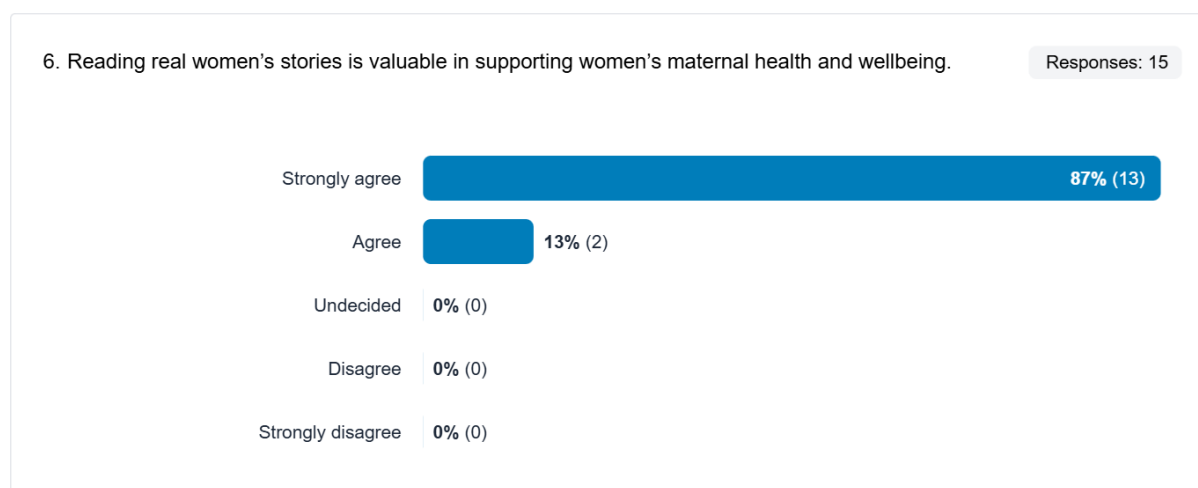
lived in the UK for just over two years and was (at the time) breastfeeding her 7-month-old baby. She was grateful for the support she was receiving from the infant feeding team in her hometown of Runcorn and appreciated the *Between Us* collection as part of a wrap-around, local care network that had helped her through simultaneous life changes and transitions as a young woman and new mother. She shared that the very conservative society she grew up in would not tolerate breastfeeding in public and welcomed the difference she was now experiencing, not just in existing cultural attitudes but in the drive towards supporting more women to breastfeed confidently and without judgment. She saw the use of creative methods and storytelling as especially appropriate in shifting societal attitudes whilst also remaining responsive to individual women's own circumstances and experiences.

Collectively, interviewees from *Between Us* readership and audiences believed that the programme was powerful in raising awareness of breastfeeding but that more remains to be done. Having the creative work publicly accessible and visible, especially to those who wouldn't ordinarily engage with such creative content, was seen as particularly effective in raising awareness. Interviewees advocated for more creative programmes and content that could be accessible in 'everyday' public spaces, particularly those used frequently by families with young children.

3 DISCUSSION POINTS AND RECOMENDATIONS

Valuing creativity in women's health care

Evaluation data make a powerful case for the value of peer-led storytelling in supporting maternal wellbeing in the community. Using a mixed-method approach, including qualitative CIA techniques and narrative analysis more specifically, it has been possible to attribute a range of positive outcomes in women's health and wellbeing directly to their creative writing experiences. The positive impact of the programme on both writers as active participants and readers as their community audiences is evident, with all public engagement survey respondents agreeing for example with the statement that 'reading real women's stories is valuable in supporting women's maternal health and wellbeing'.



The leadership team has demonstrated a commitment to embedding and mainstreaming creative writing programmes within and across relevant local services, which is evidenced by the continuity between the Holding Time project and subsequent plans to develop a train the trainer model, with the development of a team of in-house facilitators trained and supported by Dr Rachel New. This is an innovative and commendable approach to overcoming the problem of more conventional short-term, project-based creative health programming. It is recommended that any roll-out of the programme continues to be evaluated, using a similar toolkit of mixed-methods, which have proven to be effective and appropriate in the case of this evaluation and others led by the LJMU research team in the women's creative health field.

Networked service provision

There is also significant evidence to suggest good connectivity with prior and existing projects and services in the Halton area, including for example positive references to the origin Holding Time project led by artist Lisa Creagh; referral pathways from other service providers; and to women's further engagement with additional programmes and services in the borough. It is recommended that these networked connections are explored further, to help position and promote the creative writing programme as a value-added initiative in the local ecology of women's health and wellbeing services and other potential social prescribing pathways.

Creative Health programming in Halton

The evidence-based impact of responsive cultural programming to date therefore presents opportunities for Halton to be a best-practice exemplar of place-based approaches to women's creative health, especially in the extent to which successive initiatives include collaboration with local cultural assets (e.g. library services as host workshop venues; Norton Priory and Widnes Library as exhibition spaces). It is recommended that further creative health programming be

strategically aligned with other cultural policy developments in the borough¹¹, including Halton's tenure as the Liverpool City Region Borough of Culture in 2026 and other developmental ambitions including proposals developed for the national Town of Culture programme.

Telling women's stories responsibly

Using qualitative research methods in the evaluation of creative health interventions such as the *Between Us* initiative helps to present a narrative story of impact, that enables participants to share and explain their experiences in their own words. This seems especially pertinent when exploring the health and wellbeing benefits of the process and practice of creative writing. It feels important to keep the voices – and words – of participating women front and centre of evaluation findings. As such, the research team has been exploring the use of different creative methods¹², including found poetry, in the reporting and dissemination stages of their evaluation projects.

Found poetry is created by taking selected words and phrases from different (often non-literary) written sources and rearranging them to compose an original poem. The following example – *It Brought it Back to Me* - was composed using excerpts from verbatim quotations (research interview data collected with participating women) referenced in section 2 of the report. It is shared with gratitude and in recognition of the talented creative women behind it.

It Brought it Back to Me

I was struggling with feeling angry at everything
I shouldn't feel this way
Inhibited or embarrassed to share whatever thoughts were in my brain.

There was a happy coming together of people in the room
Lifting one another up and encouraging each other
Making us think about things that we might have locked away for a while.

Being a woman
And the things that you go through, how you feel about yourself
Each word is a little bit more considered when it's written down.

Helping to process and move past the trauma
You stop holding yourself back
Creating something that I am really proud of.

Being strong wasn't about boxing it in
And keeping your emotions in
I wasn't protecting myself doing those things.

So you didn't feel like you were on your own
Trying to feed our babies and do our best
Walking with your head held high.

¹¹ See for example the Cultivate Halton partnership: <https://www.cultivatehalton.co.uk/>

¹² See the work of Helen Kara for more information on creative research methods:
<https://creativehealthboards.org.uk/creative-research-methods-in-health-based-research/>

APPENDIX 1 – Evaluation research design

The evaluation was conducted on a formative basis with a mixed-method approach applied throughout, prioritising the collection of qualitative data to enable a deeper understanding of the impact of the project *in context*, relative to participating women's lived experiences as new mothers. This has helped to fulfil the following evaluation research objectives (ROs):

1. Assess the impact of the creative writing project on participating women's subjective wellbeing.
2. Consider changes in participating women's individual and collective sense of agency and coping strategies in early motherhood.
3. Measure the impact of the creative writing project on breastfeeding continuation amongst participating women.
4. Identify the attributable qualities of the project and the creative experience in relation to providing responsive, personalised support to new mothers in the borough.
5. Explore the subsequent value of peer-led storytelling in supporting maternal wellbeing in the wider community.
6. Make evidence-based recommendations on the potential for attitudinal and behavioural changes in breastfeeding continuation in the borough via creative programming.

Research interviews were undertaken with a volunteer sample of participating women, upon completion of the project. A semi-structured approach was used to guide the conversation, allowing sufficient space and flexibility for participating women to freely share their own reflections and opinions. Interview guides were modelled on those successfully used in earlier evaluation research on the value of creative interventions in maternal health and wellbeing and were designed to explore participating women's individual circumstances; peri/postnatal experiences; and the impact of the project on their subjective wellbeing, self and parental efficacy (ROs 1 and 2). Critical incident analysis techniques were used to identify any particularly meaningful or impactful moments in the creative writing experience (RO 4). In-depth research interviews were conducted with 7 participating women in total, both online via Microsoft Teams and in-person at local selected public venues when possible. Interview conversations were fully transcribed with participants' consent, to enable the use of verbatim quotations in evaluation data analysis and reporting.

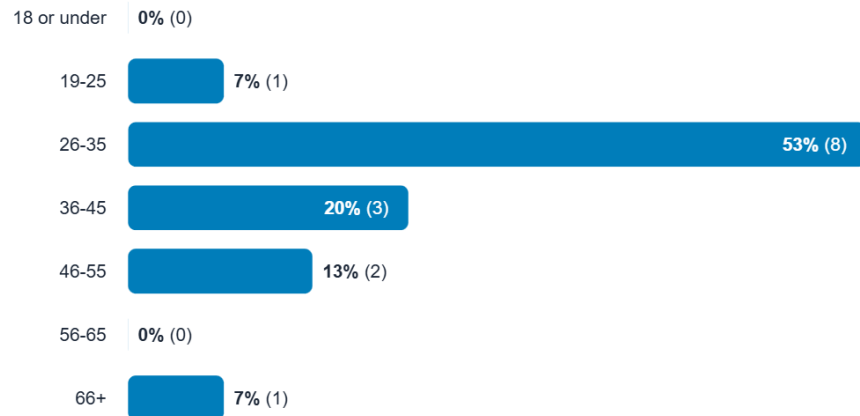
Where possible and appropriate, evaluators joined the creative writing workshops to enable participant observation of the programme in action. This helped to embed the evaluation research process on a formative basis, including introducing researchers to participating women and familiarising researchers with the creative process. Field notes were subsequently used to shape a narrative analysis of the heuristic value of the creative experience in real time (RO 4).

A short, paper-based survey questionnaire was administered at the start and end of the programme with both participating groups, with the support of the workshop facilitator. This is described in more detail in *Appendix 2: Measuring subjective wellbeing* (ROs 1, 2 and 3).

Upon wider dissemination and promotion of the project, including for example publication of the *Between Us* digital anthology, evaluation research methods were embedded within all public engagement activities. This included for example a short, QR code-linked online survey designed to capture public responses to published/exhibited creative content, including attitudes towards new motherhood and breastfeeding. A total of 15 usable survey responses were received, with the following sample demographics according to age, gender and place of residence:

8. Which age group do you belong to:

Responses: 15



9. Which of the following best describes your gender identity:

Responses: 15



10. Do you live in the Halton borough? If 'no' please give name of home town or area in 'other' option.

Responses: 15



The survey also acted as a recruitment tool for a volunteer sample of non-participating women to take part in evaluation research interviews, designed to explore the value of peer-led storytelling in supporting maternal wellbeing in the wider community (ROs 5 and 6). A total of 3 research interviews were conducted by telephone in the public engagement phase of the evaluation with women from the community, also following a semi-structured design and covering topics including engagement with the *Between Us* collection; personal and/or professional interests in women's maternal health and/or infant feeding; opinions on the value of peer-led storytelling in women's maternal health; and interest in participating in similar creative activities and programmes in support of own health and wellbeing.

APPENDIX 2 – Measuring subjective wellbeing

In part fulfilment of evaluation research objectives 1 and 2, a short, 10-item standardised measure of subjective wellbeing, general self-efficacy and parental efficacy was administered in person (using print copies) at the start (baseline) and endpoints of the programme with both participating groups. Survey items were adapted from the PERMA wellbeing scale, General Self-Efficacy (GSE) and Parenting Sense of Competence (PSOC) scales. As validated measurements used extensively in prior research, a degree of trust can be placed in their reliability and appropriateness in evaluation studies involving (potentially) vulnerable groups. Participants were asked to respond to given questions using an 11-point scale, where 0 = never and 10 = always (see table 1 below). A summary of available survey data is provided below.

On a scale of 0-10:		0=Never					10=Always					
P2	In general, how often do you feel positive?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
E2	In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
R1	To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
M3	To what extent do you generally feel you have a sense of direction in your life?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
A3	How often are you able to handle your responsibilities?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
GSE4	Are you confident that you can deal efficiently with unexpected events?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
GSE7	Do you remain calm when facing difficulties?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
GSE8	Do you usually find solutions when faced with a problem?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
PSOC10	Do you meet your own personal expectations in being a parent?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
PSOC15	Do you feel like you have the necessary skills to be a parent?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Table 1: Survey form used in evaluation research

A total of 6 (baseline) and 8 (endpoint) completed survey forms were returned by BFGp1 and 8 (baseline) and 7 (endpoint) by Gp2. Survey data was analysed cumulatively to assess the mean scores for each survey item across each participating group. This is to protect the anonymity of group members and to limit the extent to which individual participants may feel exposed or vulnerable in completing the survey.

Data show an increase in mean scores for most survey items for BFGp1, including notable increases in PERMA scores for feeling positive, excited and interested in things; GSE scores relating to facing difficulties and dealing with unexpected events; and PSOC score relating to parenting skills. See table 2 and figure 1 for full survey results for BFGp1.

	Base	End
In general, how often do you feel positive?	6.3	7.3
In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?	6.7	8.5
To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?	6	6.5
To what extent do you generally feel you have a sense of direction in your life?	6.7	7.4
How often are you able to handle your responsibilities?	7	7.6
Are you confident that you can deal efficiently with unexpected events?	5.7	6.9
Do you remain calm when facing difficulties?	5.8	7
Do you usually find solutions when faced with a problem?	7.2	7.4
Do you meet your own personal expectations in being a parent?	6.3	6.3
Do you feel like you have the necessary skills to be a parent?	7	8.1

Table 2: Survey results (mean scores) for BFGp1

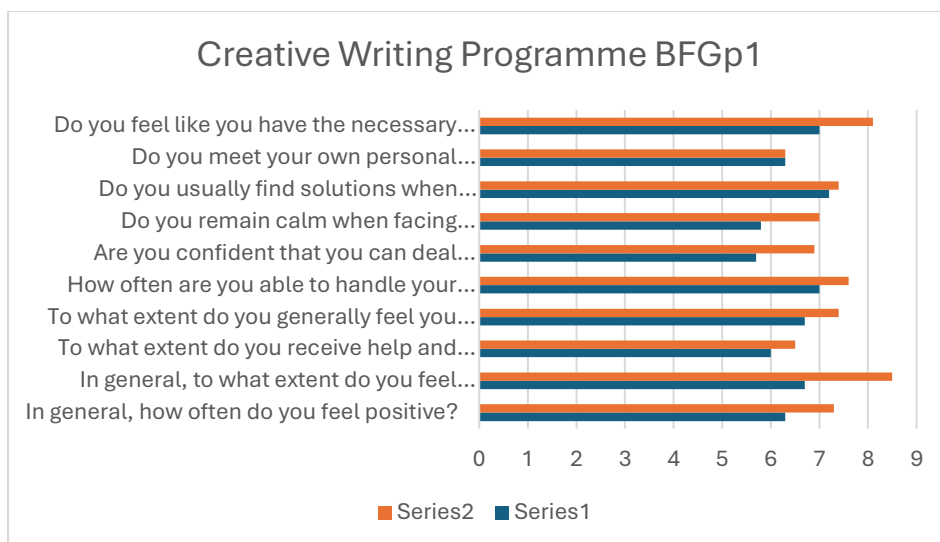


Figure 1: Survey results (mean scores) for BFGp1 (series 1 = baseline; series 2 = endpoint data)

Data show comparatively static, and in some cases decreasing scores for Gp2, with only one notable increase in mean scores for GSE item relating to confidence in dealing with unexpected events. See table 3 and figure 2 for full survey results for Gp2.

	Base	End
In general, how often do you feel positive?	5.8	5.1
In general, to what extent do you feel excited and interested in things?	5.9	5.8
To what extent do you receive help and support from others when you need it?	7	7
To what extent do you generally feel you have a sense of direction in your life?	5.4	5.7
How often are you able to handle your responsibilities?	7.1	6.9
Are you confident that you can deal efficiently with unexpected events?	4.6	5.7
Do you remain calm when facing difficulties?	6.3	5.7
Do you usually find solutions when faced with a problem?	7.3	6.3
Do you meet your own personal expectations in being a parent?	5.5	5.7
Do you feel like you have the necessary skills to be a parent?	7.5	7.1

Table 3: Survey results (mean scores) for Gp2

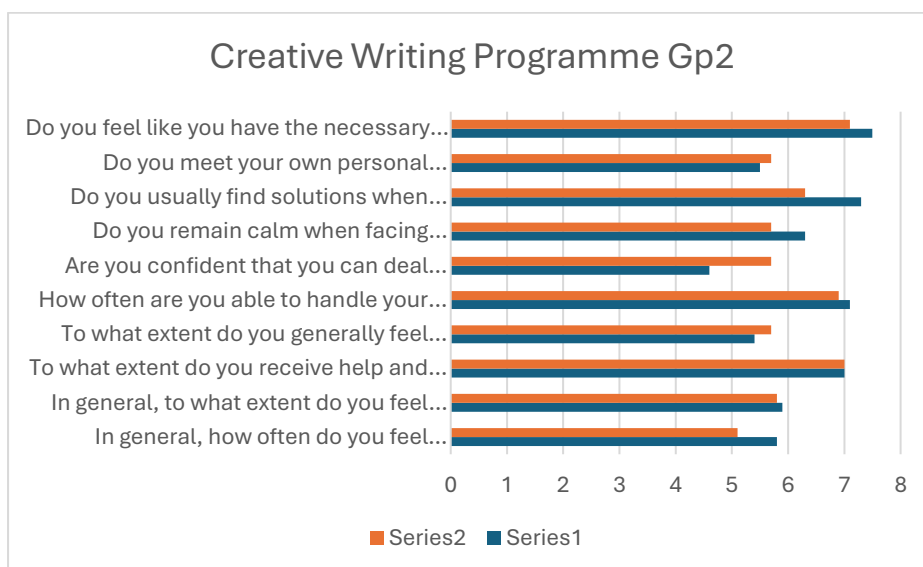


Figure 2: Survey results (mean scores) for Gp2 (series 1 = baseline; series 2 = endpoint data)



Between Us: Halton Borough Council's Creative Writing Programme for New Mothers