

State of Maternity Services Report 2018 – Wales



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#soms2018

Executive summary

The RCM's annual *State of Maternity Services Report* provides an overview of some of the 'big picture' trends that are taking place in the midwifery workforce and identifies some of the challenges that face the profession and our maternity services. This year, for the first time, the RCM is publishing individual reports for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as Wales, rather than one report for the UK as a whole. That has also enabled us to publish this report in both Welsh and English.

The number of live births in Wales last year fell by 2.3 per cent compared to the year before. In fact, the number of births has dropped every year since 2010, falling by 10.5 per cent overall to what it was in the middle of the last decade.

This has eased pressure on the service, which is a good thing. It should create greater space and opportunity to improve the quality of care to women.

This reduction in births has to be balanced however with the rise in the complexity of care that many women require. So, for example, 18.4 per cent of pregnant women in 2015/16 were recorded as smokers at their initial assessment and 27.5 per cent were recorded as obese.

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The age of women accessing services also has an impact. Older mothers will, on average, need more care and support, and that needs to be factored into workforce calculations. To illustrate this, the number of births to women in every age category under the age of 30 fell between 2009 and 2017, but births to women in every age category over the age of 30 rose.

The age profile of women and levels of smoking and obesity are all examples of the complexity of the workload faced by midwives, maternity support workers and the entire maternity care team. The higher the levels of complexity, the more that will be required of staff and the more staff who are needed to provide the same level of care.

Something interesting is happening with the age profile of midwives too. There has been a welcome rise in the proportion of midwives in their twenties and thirties, up from 31.2 per cent in March 2011 to 40.9 per cent in November 2017. At the same time however there has been a continued rise in the proportion of midwives in their fifties and sixties, up from 27.9 per cent to 34.5 per cent over the same period. This is explained by quite a drop in the proportion of midwives in their forties, from 41 per cent to 24.6 per cent.

The NHS is lucky to have the midwives in the older age categories. In most instances, they will have given many years' service to the NHS

and bring immense experience to their roles. But inevitably they are beginning to near retirement and we need to act in good time before they leave the service.

The Welsh Government increased the number of training places for student midwives in 2017/18 to 134, which was a 40 per cent rise on the previous year. We very much welcome the decision to maintain this higher level of places in the current academic year. This should, in time, accelerate the rebalancing of the midwifery profession's age profile.

"The changing age profile of mothers continues to increase pressure on the system...And the loss of EU midwives, especially in England, runs the risk of the NHS across the border poaching midwives from Wales's NHS."

We do need to consider too what the implications are of these changes to the age profile of the midwifery workforce. People will tend to have different responsibilities at different stages of their life, from juggling the needs of raising a young family to caring for elderly parents, and eventually having a higher likelihood of developing medical conditions of their own.

Brexit is a threat to the midwifery workforce in Wales, but not in the obvious way. Figures given in answer to questions in the National Assembly for Wales suggest that there are only a modest number of midwives working in Wales who come from another EU member state. Moreover, the number who left the employment of the NHS in Wales in the months after the 2016 referendum are also modest.

The risk is that if midwives from elsewhere in the EU who currently work in England, as well over 1,000 do, the NHS in England – currently short of the equivalent of 3,500 full-time midwives – will seek to recruit increasingly from Wales. The substantial jump in midwifery training numbers in Wales could prove too tempting for recruiters in England.

We are seeing some improvement, but challenges persist. The changing age profile of mothers continues to increase pressure on the system. Whilst we see a greater proportion of midwives in their twenties and thirties, we still have a substantial number of midwives not far from retirement. And the loss of EU midwives, especially in England, runs the risk of the NHS across the border poaching midwives from Wales's NHS.

We look forward to engaging over the course of the next year to see if we can sustain the improvements that we are seeing and help tackle the challenges. We'll report back in the next *State of Maternity Services Report*.



Number of live births

Source: StatsWales

768

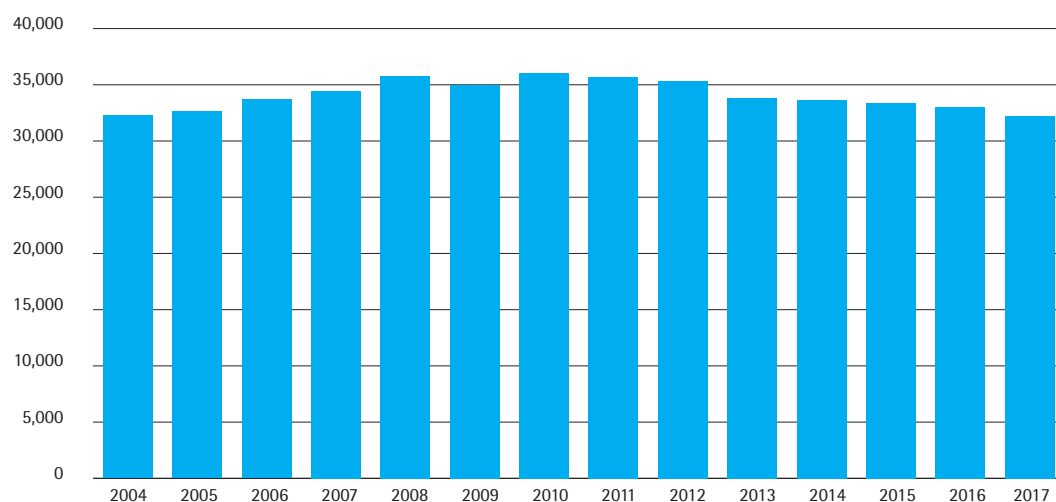
fewer babies born in Wales last year compared to the year before

Source: StatsWales

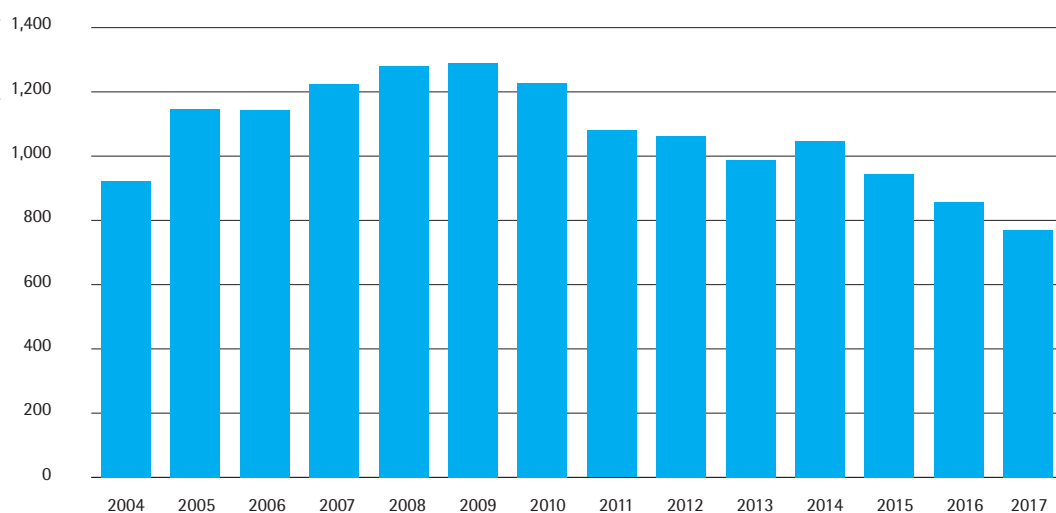
Number of homebirths

Source: StatsWales

Number of live births



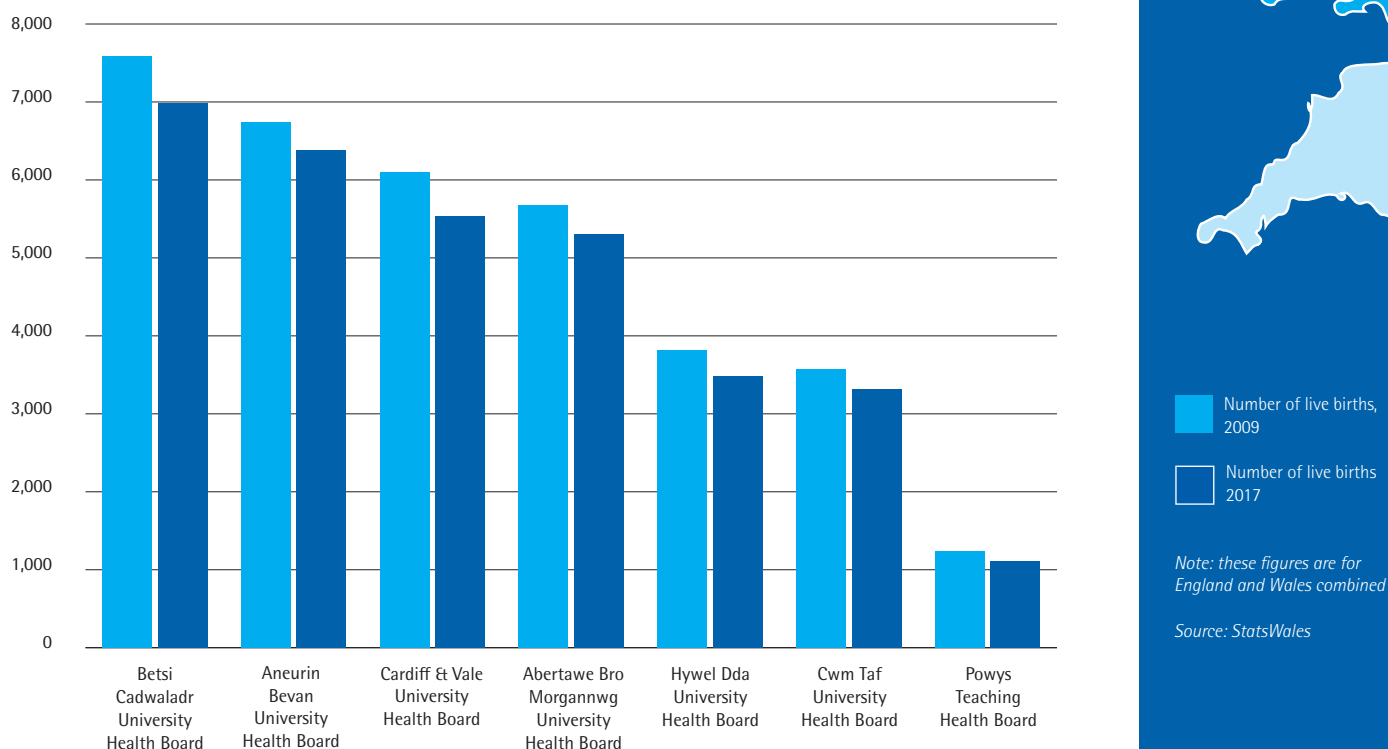
Number of homebirths



There were 768 fewer babies born in Wales last year compared to the year before, a drop of 2.3 per cent. The number has fallen by 3,797 (or 10.5 per cent) since the high of 36,033 in 2010, returning to levels seen in the middle of the last decade.

The number of homebirths has fallen faster. There were 770 babies born at home in 2017, which was 88 fewer than the previous year (a drop of 10.3 per cent in just one year). Last year's figure slumped 40.4 per cent (or 521 births) from the high of 1,291 in 2009.

Births by local health board



All areas of Wales saw a fall in the number of live births between 2009 and 2017. The decline in the number of births in recent years has not been driven by any unrepresentative slump in any one area.

The falls ranged from five per cent in the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board area to 10 per cent in the Powys Teaching Health Board area (where the fall equated to around 11 fewer births per month).



Change in number
of live births,
2009-2017

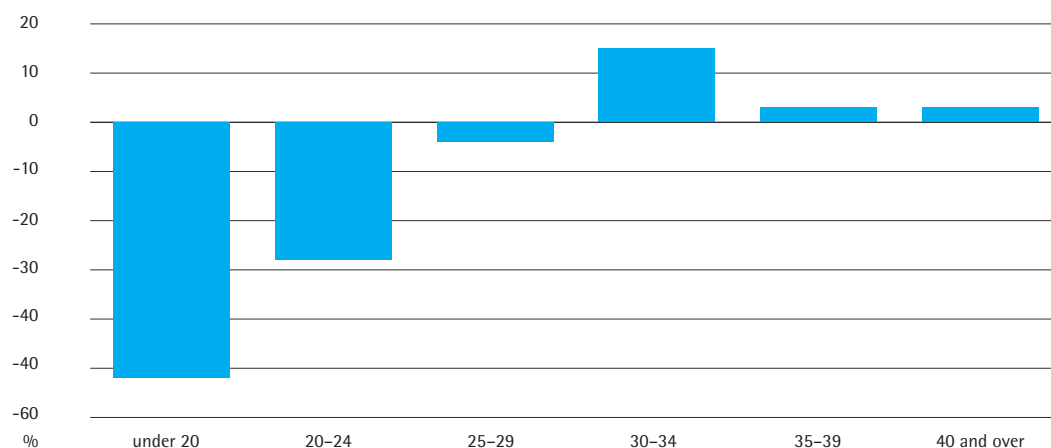
Source: StatsWales

15%

rise in the number of
babies born to women
in their early thirties
(30-34)

Source: StatsWales

Age profile of mothers



Whilst the overall number of births in Wales has fallen, the number of births to women in older age groups has risen. Since 2009, there has been a 15 per cent rise in the number of babies born to women in their early thirties (30-34), as well as a three per cent rise to both women in their late thirties (35-39) and to women aged 40 or older.

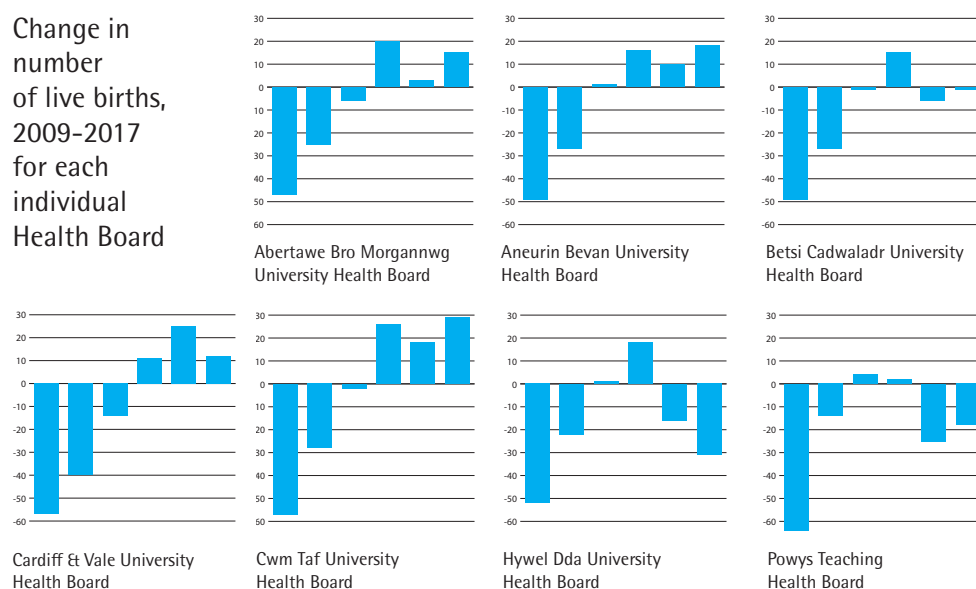
At the same time, the number of babies born to teenagers has more than halved (down 52 per cent). The number of births to women in their early twenties (20-24) is down by more than a quarter (28 per cent), with a four per cent drop to women in their late twenties (25-29).

Older women will, on average, require more care during their pregnancy and at the birth. This will not be true of all older women, of course, but overall it does add to the mix of complexity with which maternity services must cope. An ageing of the profile of women accessing maternity care does therefore increase the number of midwives needed by the NHS in Wales.

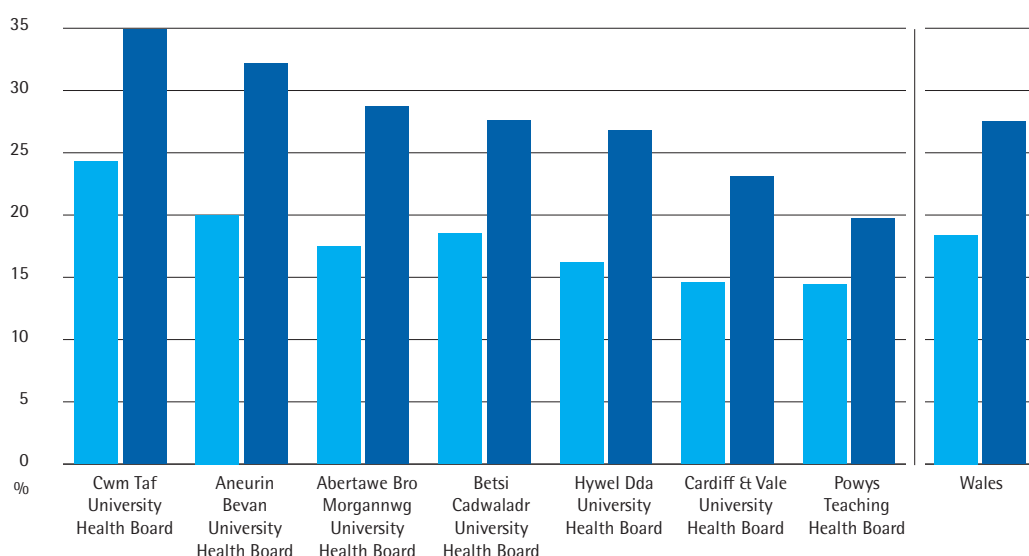
The trends seen across Wales as a whole however were not replicated in each part of the country. In the areas covered by the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, Hywel Dda University Health Board, and Powys Teaching Health Board, for example, women in both of the oldest age groups (late thirties and older) gave birth to fewer babies, not more. But in the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, Cardiff & Vale University Health Board, and Cwm Taf University Health Board areas, there were double-digit rises in the number of births to women in these two oldest age categories.

When it comes to the age profile of mothers, we are seeing different patterns emerging in the different parts of Wales, but overall – across Wales as a whole – the story is fewer births to younger women and more births to older women.

Change in number of live births, 2009-2017 for each individual Health Board



Smoking & obesity rates in pregnancy

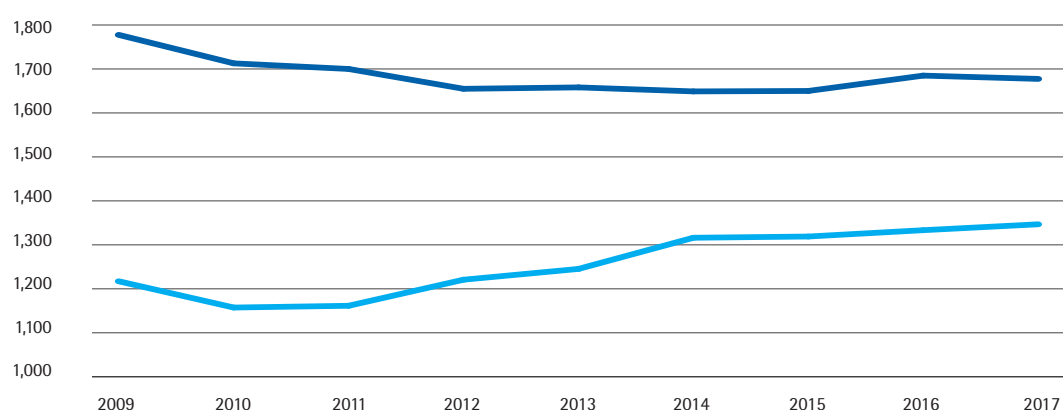


There are quite dramatic differences in smoking and obesity rates between the different areas of Wales. In the Cwm Taf University Health Board area, around a quarter of women at the time of their initial assessment were smokers and around a third were assessed as obese. In the Powys Teaching Health Board area, by contrast, around one in seven were smokers and around one in five was obese.

As with the age profile of women, levels of smoking and obesity add to the complexity of the workload faced by midwives, maternity support workers and the entire maternity care team. The higher the levels of complexity, the higher the number of midwives and other staff who are needed in the workforce.

The more that can be done to improve general levels of good health amongst the general population, including reducing levels of smoking and encouraging people to maintain a body weight within the healthy range, the less demand that will be placed on the NHS to cope with the knock-on effects. That is as true for maternity services as it is for all other parts of the health service.

Midwives & non-medical maternity staff



The midwifery workforce in Wales has risen steadily in recent years. Since 2009, despite a fall at the start of this decade, the number of midwives working in the NHS in Wales has risen by the equivalent of 129 full-time midwives (up 10.6 per cent). At the same time, the total number of all non-medical maternity staff has dropped, but by a small number, down the equivalent of 100 full-time staff, or 5.6 per cent.

We are hopeful that this rise will be continued thanks to the decision by the Welsh Government to increase the number of training places available to those wanting to become midwives. There was a 40 per cent rise in places in 2017/18, to 134, and this has been maintained in the current 2018/19 academic year.

The latest figures we have show that of the 94 who started their midwifery training in 2014/15, 84 graduated as midwives. That means that 89 per cent of those who started their studies, successfully completed them, which is a positive sign that the increase in the number of training places will lead to many more newly-qualified midwives available to work in Wales's NHS.

89%

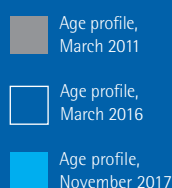
of those who started their studies in 2014/15, successfully completed them

Source: StatsWales

Number of all non-medical maternity staff in the NHS in Wales (full time equivalent)

Number of midwives working in the NHS in Wales (full time equivalent)

Source: StatsWales



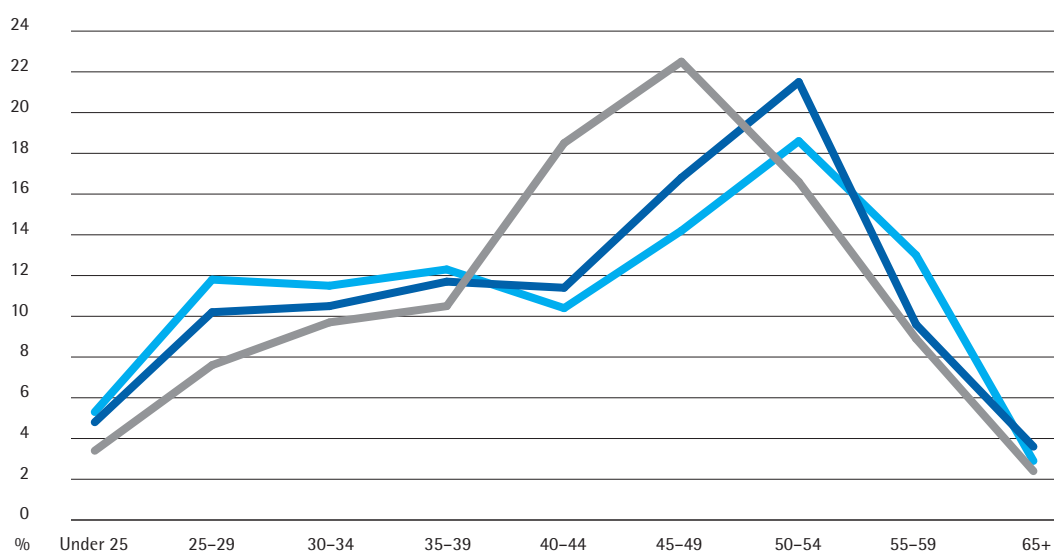
Source: Information provided by the Cabinet Secretary for Health & Social Services to a question asked in the National Assembly for Wales

40.9%

the proportional increase in the number of midwives in their twenties and thirties

Source: Information provided by the Cabinet Secretary for Health & Social Services to a question asked in the National Assembly for Wales

Age profile of midwives



There has been a marked change in the age profile of the midwifery profession in Wales over the course of this decade. Similar changes have been witnessed elsewhere in Britain.

We have previously been concerned about the proportion of midwives who are in the oldest age categories. Back in March 2011, just over a quarter of midwives were in their fifties or sixties (27.9 per cent). Since then, this proportion has actually risen to around a third (34.7 per cent in March 2016 and 34.5 per cent in November 2017).

At the other end of the spectrum however, the proportion of midwives in the youngest age groups has also risen. Whereas just under one in three (31.2 per cent) of midwives in March 2011 were in their twenties or thirties, that figure had risen to almost two in five (37.2 per cent) by March 2016, and to over two in five (40.9 per cent) by November 2017.

The proportion of midwives in their forties however has collapsed, from two in five in March 2011 (41 per cent) to one in four (24.6 per cent) by November 2017.

It would seem therefore that we are making progress in getting more new midwives into the profession to replace the growing number who are nearing retirement age, with the proportion in their twenties and thirties up from 31.2 per cent to 40.9 per cent. These midwives will hopefully give several decades of service to the NHS.

But the challenge of an ageing workforce has not gone away. As the figures show, the proportion in their fifties and sixties has risen during the decade, from 27.9 per cent in March 2011 to 34.5 per cent by November 2017. But that proportion did edge down ever so slightly between March 2016 and November 2017, from 34.7 per cent to 34.5 per cent, so perhaps we are at a turning point.

We welcome therefore the increase in the number of training places for student midwives in Wales as this will, hopefully, continue to ensure more newly-qualified midwives join Wales's NHS.