

Blueprint for better maternity care in Wales

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt in every corner of Wales, and nowhere more than in our NHS. As we begin the long process of recovery, we must ensure that it is not undermined by trying to do too much too soon. This is particularly true for NHS services, where staff, including midwives and maternity support workers, will need time to recover from what they have experienced.

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The Royal College of Midwives Wales has identified five areas where it wants to see action from the Welsh Government.

1. Post-pandemic recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest health challenge the NHS has ever faced, and its impact on staff is immense. In April 2020, nearly four per cent of nurses and midwives in Wales were off sick with COVID-19. While the rates in 2021 are significantly lower – 0.8 per cent of nurses and midwives in March 2021 – the impact has been felt in every maternity service across the country.

We welcome the Welsh Government's plan to help the health system recover post-pandemic and its recognition that staff too need to recover. In many cases they are exhausted and even traumatised by what they have experienced. The process of recovery in the NHS must take account of this, including the provision of mental health support. We also do not yet completely understand the impact of long COVID. There is some early, preliminary work that suggests younger women are several times more likely than younger men to suffer the ill-effects of long COVID. This has obvious implications for professions dominated by women, such as midwifery. This will need to be monitored closely over the coming months and years. We are seeking a continued and determined commitment that NHS staff will get the time and support they need to recover.

While maintaining service provision during the pandemic has been challenging, there have been innovations in practice in maternity, particularly with the use of digital technology. The Government should support maternity services in ensuring that

effective, innovative practice is identified, assessed and maintained, before the muscle memory of how things have always been done returns.

2. Improving maternal mental health post-pandemic

Pregnant women, new mothers and those who have experienced pregnancy loss often need specialist mental health support. In Wales, even before the pandemic, these women have not always been well-supported. Early research suggests that the need for these services has increased substantially during the pandemic, with isolation, lack of access to antenatal groups and fewer face-to-face contacts with midwives and health visitors taking their toll. Evidence also points to the impact being harder on Black, Asian, minority ethnic and poorer mothers.

The Welsh Government must invest in maternal mental health services, not only for those impacted by the pandemic, but all those who need support. This means better access to services, regardless of where women live, and greater investment in the training and development of specialist midwives.



3. Improving the safety of maternity services

The RCM is committed to supporting its members to provide safe, high quality care. We must not only share good practice, but we also learn from mistakes. The current Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW) review has found that “care being delivered within maternity services across Wales was of good quality, well informed, individualised and family centred.” It did, however, also find areas for improvement, including several recommendations for action by the Welsh Government.

If we are truly to embrace the maternity safety agenda in Wales, it must be properly resourced, both in terms of staffing and in training, and it has to be implemented across the whole country. We call on the Welsh Government to invest in maternity safety across Wales, including the implementation of the HIW’s recommendations. Funding should be ringfenced and include, but not be limited to, the HIW’s call to implement electronic records and a single maternity dashboard, and a review of the preceptorship programme to improve the experience for newly qualified midwives.

Good, consistent training for staff both individually and together with the wider team is vital if we are to improve the safety of maternity services in Wales yet further. The Welsh Government must improve the funding and availability of training, including having appropriate staffing levels to allow midwives, maternity support workers (MSWs) and other maternity staff to take up training opportunities.

4. Good maternity care is fundamental to good public health

The past year has underlined the importance of good public health – and also highlighted the significant public health challenges that Wales faces. Midwives and MSWs have the skills and the access to some of the most at-risk groups to support the Welsh Government’s work to tackle this and to help drive improvement in public health.

Despite the well-known impact of smoking on health, as a percentage, more adults smoke in Wales (16%) than in England (14.3%). Pregnancy is an ideal opportunity for smokers to quit and midwives and MSWs are well placed to support them. Midwives can signpost pregnant women who smoke to services as well as supporting and encouraging

their efforts to quit. While younger people may be less likely to visit their GP or other health services, having this work done by and within maternity services means that women, and their partners, may quit far earlier.

Obesity is seen by many as a health timebomb in Wales. In 2019, almost 60% of adults in Wales were believed to be overweight or obese. Midwives and MSWs are well placed to help pregnant women manage their weight in pregnancy and to understand how to make healthier choices.

Supporting pregnant women in this way has a positive impact not only on their health, but also that of their baby. In addition, midwives and MSWs can also support women to breastfeed, which can deliver long-term health benefits to a child.

We want to work with the Welsh Government to improve the health of the people of Wales, using the skills and access our members have to pregnant women and their families.

5. Midwife and student midwife numbers

We can only drive improvements to maternity care in Wales if there are enough midwives working in the NHS in every part of Wales. The RCM welcomes the Welsh Government’s commitment to increase midwifery training places by 15% in 2021/22, from 161 to 185. While the number of midwives in Wales is very stable – 1,376 full-time equivalent midwives working in the NHS in Wales in September 2020, compared to 1,389 in 2019 – we must not be complacent.

More must be done to retain the qualified and experienced staff we have. The Welsh Government must continue to focus on steady, sustainable growth in midwife numbers and ensure that we maintain the skills, knowledge and experience of those already working.

**For further information, contact RCM Wales, Unit 13b Drake Walk Brigantine Place, Atlantic Wharf Cardiff CF10 4AN
0300 303 0444**

