On politics

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Poll position

Does your candidate for MP accept the RCM’s big five demands for improving the NHS and its maternity services at the forthcoming general election?

The single thing I want you to take away from reading this is the motivation to take part in the general election on 8 June. This is the third UK-wide poll in the last two years, and you could be forgiven for being a little weary of it all. But this matters. Brexit is set to dominate voters’ thoughts, but with over three million babies likely to be born on the NHS during the expected lifetime of the next parliament, health services deserve plenty of voter attention too (ONS, 2016). During this campaign, the RCM has been lobbying candidates from the mainstream parties with five ‘asks’ we want them to carry out if elected.

1. Eliminate national midwifery shortage

Our first ask is fundamental. We are asking candidates to commit to pushing for the elimination of the national midwifery shortage. England is short of around 3500 midwives. Current efforts to reduce this are pitiful, with the number of midwives up just 79 in the past year (NHS Digital, 2017a). That is less than one extra midwife per maternity unit! We want more MPs to speak out on this.

2. Fair pay for NHS staff

Our second ask is fair pay for NHS staff. With prices rising faster than NHS pay, midwives and MSWs are being made poorer with each passing year. Indeed, if their pay had risen at the same rate as prices since 2010, midwives would today earn £6600 more than they do. This is a shocking figure, and reveals just how hard NHS staff are being hit by years of pay restraint. For more, turn to page 24. We are calling on candidates to support something very simple. We are asking them to sign up to the idea that the independent NHS Pay Review Body should be left to make its recommendation on the pay of NHS staff, and the government should implement what they recommend.

3. Remain open to EU midwives

Our third ask is for the UK to remain open to European midwives. There are over 1300 midwives working in the NHS in England known to be nationals of EU member states (Dunne, 2017). With information on nationality not held on many health service staff, the true figure is certainly higher. Without them, we would be looking at a national midwifery shortage of around 5000. If that was the case, the entire service might just collapse. These midwives – indeed all EU staff in the NHS – should be given immediate guarantees on their right to continue living and working in the NHS after Brexit. More than that, the UK should keep the door open in the future to suitably qualified healthcare professionals from across the EU. This should all be done, of course, at the same time as we build up the supply of midwives and others trained here in the UK.

4. More resources for the NHS

Our fourth ask is for more resources for the NHS. Almost every part of the health service is struggling. Demand is rising faster than money going in. Choices for women using maternity services, as well as the quality and even the safety of care, are at risk. Even hospital managers, rarely willing to rock the boat, are speaking out. In an overstretched service, services such as postnatal care – when, for example, mental health problems are spotted – can suffer cutbacks. Given this, we are calling on parliamentary candidates to support more resources for the NHS, and in particular maternity services.

5. Improve public health

Our final ask is on public health. Around 12% of women are recorded as smokers at their booking appointment and 20% as obese (NHS Digital, 2017b). Pregnancy provides an ideal opportunity to encourage women and their families to make important changes to how they live their lives. Promoting breastfeeding too has the potential to give more newborns the best possible start to life. We are asking all candidates to support greater emphasis on improving public health.

We need your help

The best thing you can do is ask your local candidates if they support these ideas. The RCM is lobbying hard, but candidates always respond better to local residents. As their potential constituents, you will be far more likely to have an impact on them during an election campaign than a national organisation such as the RCM. Up until polling day, it is you who has the power. Be sure to use it.

Find out who your local candidates are by looking at the local newspaper or regional TV news. Google the local branches of the main parties, or look at the leaflets that come through your door. Contact candidates and challenge them, especially on numbers and pay. If they knock on your door or call you on the telephone, raise these issues with them.

Email us at elections@rcm.org.uk to let us know what they say. Every email you send and every conversation you have with a candidate or their helpers will help strengthen the case for more midwives and better-funded maternity services.