Executive summary

“When there are not enough midwives it is the quality of the service that women receive that suffers.”

Another year passes and NHS maternity services in England remain thousands of midwives short. Our latest calculation is that the country needs 2,600 more midwives to be able to cope with the number of births the country is experiencing.

If a shortage did not exist, midwives would be able to spend more time with women antenatally helping them quit smoking, for example, and postnatally to help them initiate and sustain breastfeeding – meaning healthier mothers and infants – and spot signs of mental health problems. With maternity services under intense stress and strain, these things are inevitably pushed to the sidelines. When there are not enough midwives it is the quality of the service that women receive that suffers.

With NICE having now published safe staffing guidelines for maternity, trusts in England that provide maternity care should know how many midwives they need to employ. Any failure to employ enough midwives and any consequences that flow from that failure must rest with the senior managers who continue to choose not to staff their service safely.

It is not just the current shortage of midwives in England that concerns us however. In preparing this year’s State of Maternity Services Report, we unearthed a fact that makes us fear that the situation may be about to get much worse, and hit other parts of the UK too.

Between 2005 and 2014 the number of midwives working in England’s NHS rose. But if we look at the age profile of midwives now and then we see that 98 per cent of the increase occurred amongst midwives aged 50 or older. The number of midwives falling into this category rose by 3,106 between 2005 and 2014, whilst the number aged below 50 rose by just 66.

Many of these older midwives are very experienced, of course, and they are able to mentor newer midwives too. They are giving valuable service to the NHS. But with around a third of midwives in England (31 per cent) aged 50 or older, we must ensure that they are replaced in good time before they retire. If we wait, there will not be enough time for newly-qualified midwives to gain the experience and confidence they need before many of their more senior, more experienced colleagues leave the service.

This is not just a problem for England. This retirement time bomb – and it’s ticking. Thankfully we still have time to defuse it, but we need to start before it’s too late.

It continues to be important to highlight that we can never know what will happen to birth figures in the coming years. It appeared for a short time that numbers were on the slide. Birth figures from 2013 had suggested the baby boom might turn into a slump. The number of births was down in each part of the United Kingdom. In England, the fall was almost 30,000 compared to the year before. In Scotland, the drop was a little over 2,000. In Wales, by almost 1,500. In Northern Ireland, by just under 1,000.

Last year however the fall was much shallower in England, at just 3,000, and 200 in Wales. In Scotland and Northern Ireland there were, in fact, rises in the number of babies compared to 2013, of 700 and 100 respectively. Overall the fall in the number of babies born in the UK as a whole in 2014 was just 0.3 per cent down on 2013, having fallen by more than four per cent the year before. We just don’t know if numbers will start rising again this year.

We have long known that the midwifery profession is ageing, but the facts unearthed in the creation of this year’s State of Maternity Services Report lay bare the scale of the problem. We’ve found a midwifery retirement time bomb – and it’s ticking. Thankfully we still have time to defuse it, but we need to start before it’s too late.
The number of babies born in 2014 was almost 100,000 higher than it was in 2001. Maternity services are still having to cope with a substantially greater level of activity than at the turn of the century. The fall in 2013 has been largely halted. A fall of 4.3 per cent has been followed by a fall of 0.5 per cent.

And whilst the number of births is well up in every region, some have seen bigger rises than others. In the North East, for example, births were up 10 per cent between 2001 and 2014; the jump was at least twice as great however in eastern England (20 per cent), the South West (also 20 per cent) and London (22 per cent).
There have been two marked changes to the age profile of mothers since the start of the baby boom in 2001: the dramatic fall in the number of babies born to teenagers; and the rise in the number of births to older women.

Between 2001 and 2014 births to woman and girls aged under 20 fell by 41 per cent, from over 44,000 to below 26,000; births to women aged between 20 and 24 remained stable (up three per cent).

At the same time, births to women in their early thirties topped 200,000 and for women in their late thirties the number rose 33 per cent to top 100,000.

It was up three-quarters (78 per cent) for women aged 40 and over.

Taken as a whole, women who give birth later in life will on average need more care from the NHS. That will not be the case for every woman in that category, but it will be true on average. They are perfectly entitled to that care, of course, and should receive it, but the added complexity and cost means that more needs to be invested in maternity care to ensure they get it.

The effect of this change in the age profile of mothers does reinforce the need for more midwives.

The number of midwives continues to rise, which is welcome. The rise has not been fast enough however. The shortage of midwives has been known about and discussed for years, but it is still with us. The rise must be maintained if we are to eliminate the shortage.
The biggest jump in midwife numbers comes every year between September and November, as newly-qualified midwives are taken on by trusts. In 2010 this two-month period saw a rise of 302 midwives, followed by 509 in 2011, 578 in 2012, 680 in 2013, and by 693 in 2014. This number has therefore steadily risen in recent years.

Recent years have seen the number of places for new student midwives maintained at a good level. This needs to continue if we are to see a sustained influx of new midwives from training.

It is in the age profile of the midwifery profession that the biggest problem lies.

Between 2005 and 2014 the number of midwives working in the NHS in England rose. Whilst welcome, this was not enough. It did help push down the shortage, but looked at in more detail this increase is shown to be a short-term sticking plaster. Almost all (98 per cent) of the increase between 2005 and 2014 has been in midwives aged 50 or older. Only 2 per cent (66 midwives out of 3,172) were younger than 50.

“We need more midwives.”
Rt. Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP, Secretary of State for Health, 13th October 2015

66 more midwives since 2005 who are aged under 50

State of Maternity Services 2015

England

Midwives: monthly figures

Age profile of NHS midwives in England
The number of places for new student midwives reached around 2,500 in 2009/10 and has remained there. We welcome the fact that this number has not been cut. Given the age profile set out earlier, there is a clear need to maintain training numbers. Indeed, we would argue there is a case to scale it up.

“"We do need to expand maternity provision.""  
Rt. Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP, Secretary of State for Health, 13th October 2015
We estimate that the NHS in England is short of around 2600 midwives. This is down on recent years, and much reduced from the high of around 6000 in 2008.

We doubt however that this reduction is felt by midwives on the frontline of providing care. Does it feel different to be slightly less massively understaffed? We suspect not. Added to that there must surely be a cumulative effect from coping year after year after year with the stresses and strains caused by such a colossal shortfall in midwife numbers.

Our only hope is that the gradual reduction in the shortage spurs decision-makers on to eliminate it for good. It is possible; Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have managed it for years.

There has been a steady rise in the number of midwives working in the NHS in England. The effort to increase this number has been welcome, but more midwives are needed.

A service that is thousands of midwives short operates under intense stress and strain, and cannot possibly provide the quality of care that women deserve.

The most recent figures show that some areas are growing their midwifery workforce faster than others, even ones next to each other – NW London increased its number of midwives by seven per cent between 2013 and 2014, whilst South London’s workforce was virtually unchanged.

We doubt however that this reduction is felt by midwives on the frontline of providing care. Does it feel different to be slightly less massively understaffed? We suspect not. Added to that there must surely be a cumulative effect from coping year after year after year with the stresses and strains caused by such a colossal shortfall in midwife numbers.

Our only hope is that the gradual reduction in the shortage spurs decision-makers on to eliminate it for good. It is possible; Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have managed it for years.
The number of babies born in Scotland has not followed quite the same path as in England. The number rose from 2002 until 2008, rising 17 per cent to top 60,000. It then remained around that level, dropping back below 60,000, between 2009 and 2012. In 2013 we saw a small but noticeable (three per cent) drop, to 56,000. Last year however the number rose again, up a little over 1 per cent, to 56,725.

The number of births in Scotland to women and children aged under 20 fell 45 per cent between 2001 and 2014, from around 4,500 to around 2,500. Meantime the number of babies born to women aged in their late thirties rose by 21 per cent and for women aged 40 or over the rise was three-quarters (76 per cent), or by almost 1,000.

The number of babies born in Scotland last year, compared to the year before

711

more births in Scotland last year, compared to the year before
The number of midwives working in the NHS in Scotland has been fairly stable – a little either side of 2,400 – for a few years now. We do not believe that, at the national level, there is currently a shortage of midwives in Scotland.

In Scotland, between 2011 and 2015, the number of staff (midwives and maternity care assistants) aged under 50 fell by 207 whilst the number aged 50 or over rose by 303. Overall, the percentage aged 50 or older rose from a third (32 per cent) to two-fifths (42 per cent) during this period.

As in England, the age profile is increasingly skewed towards older age categories. There are advantages to this at the present time, with more midwives in post who are typically more experienced, but there is a bigger disadvantage – namely that these midwives must be replaced, and quickly, if Scotland is not to face a serious shortage as they retire in the near future.
Scotland

We urge the Scottish Government to look at the current number of student midwife places it is commissioning, with particular regard to the need to correct the imbalance in the age profile. More, younger midwives are needed if we are to avoid a serious problem in the near future caused by the retirement of so many midwives.

It might feel difficult to justify when there is no current shortage of midwives in Scotland, but if nothing is done to address the age profile issue there could be serious consequences for the quality and even the safety of Scottish maternity services.

Rise in births to women over 40

78% increase in births to women aged 40+ in England

76% increase in births to women aged 40+ in Scotland

15% increase in births to women aged 40+ in Wales

57% increase in births to women aged 40+ in Northern Ireland
Wales

Live births

Just like Scotland, Wales saw a rise in the number of births between 2002 and 2008; in Wales the increase was 18 per cent, or about 5,500. Also like Scotland, Wales then witnessed a small tailing off of the number, before falling noticeably in 2013. And in the most recent year for which we have figures, 2014, the number pretty much stopped falling, down just 0.6 per cent on the previous year.

Age profile of mothers

Like elsewhere in the UK, Wales has seen a fall in the number of births to women and girls aged under 20 and a rise in the number of babies born to older women. In Wales however both changes have been less pronounced than elsewhere.

Between 2007 and 2012, the fall in births to those aged under 16 was 27 per cent, and for those aged 16 to 19 the figure was 26 per cent.

During the same period, births to women in their early thirties was up, but by just 11 per cent, but births to women in their late thirties actually fell, by 10 per cent. For the oldest age group, women aged 40 or above, the number was up, but by 15 per cent.

Overall the changes in Wales – in midwife and birth numbers – were less pronounced than elsewhere in the UK.
There were more midwives working in the NHS in Wales last year than there have been since at least 2009. The increase during that time was 99 midwives, or around eight per cent. This has outpaced the change in the number of births, helping to reduce the ratio of births per midwife.

The number of places for student midwives in Wales rose from 200 in 2008/09 to stand at around 300 during the period 2011/12–2013/14.

We do not have age profile information for midwives in Wales but have no reason to believe that the problem every other part of the UK has – a profession where an increasing proportion is nearing retirement age – may not also apply to Wales.
The number of babies born in Northern Ireland has also been very stable in recent years, varying between around 24,500 to 25,500 since 2007. As happened in Scotland, last year saw a rise in the number, compared to 2013.

Age profile of mothers

As elsewhere in the UK, Northern Ireland has also seen a dramatic fall in the number of babies born to women and girls aged below 20 – and for Northern Ireland also for women in their early twenties. Births to women in their thirties was up by 22 per cent, or almost 2,200. And the share of all births that were to women in their early forties doubled.
We do not believe that there is a shortage of midwives in the NHS in Northern Ireland. We do however have concerns about the age profile of the profession. As happened in Scotland, the number of midwives aged under 50 actually fell in recent years, by 224 between 2001 and 2015, whilst the number aged 50 or older rose during the same period, by 342. This makes the overall situation look quite healthy, with a growing workforce, but it is a workforce where a sizeable chunk are not too far off retirement. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
Student midwife numbers in Northern Ireland have been fairly stable in recent years, first increasing to 65 (2009–2011) before nudging down a little to 60 (2012). An urgent analysis needs to be conducted into whether this will produce the new midwives needed to deal with the changing age profile of the profession.

Northern Ireland

Student midwives

Not enough midwives under the age of 50

Thousands

more midwives since 2005, but only 66 were under the age of 50

2% midwives under age 50

342 rise in midwives over the age of 50

2015

Northern Ireland

England

224 fall in midwives under the age of 50

2001 2015