State of Maternity Services report 2012
Executive summary

This is our second annual State of Maternity Services report. The first, published in 2011, has already established itself as the definitive go-to document for the latest facts and statistics on NHS maternity care in each of the four parts of the UK: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This report provides an update, highlighting the very latest developments in this most vital of NHS services.

The report does not dwell upon or analyse structural changes within the NHS or the political battles and tussles that have taken place during the year. Instead it focuses just on the latest available statistics, revealing what is happening on the frontline of care. How many babies are being born? How many midwives are there to help these babies safely into the world? Are we training enough new midwives to deal with the changes of the future? To coin a phrase, it’s just the facts, ma’am.

A fifth of women did not feel supported by the NHS during their pregnancy and birth

This year’s stand-out observation has to be that the baby boom – which has dominated maternity care across the entire UK for a decade – seems to have petered out, but only in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England it continues still. Indeed, in 2011 there were 688,120 babies born in England, up more than 124,000 since 2001, to stand at its highest level since 1971. To give you an idea of just how long ago that was, 1971 was the year in which we abandoned pounds, shillings and pence in favour of decimal currency! There is every indication that the baby boom will continue in England. Provisional birth numbers for the first two quarters in England show births up again this year, plus official projections released recently point to birth numbers in England reaching 743,000 by 2014.

The effects of this boom and how midwives are stretched is plain to see. The results of a survey of women who have used maternity services recently – Bounty’s Word of Mum Panel – conducted in the summer of 2012 found that 40 per cent of women had always seen a different midwife during their most recent pregnancy. The survey also found that a fifth of women did not feel supported by the NHS during their pregnancy and birth, rising to a third who did not feel supported following the birth. We need to do better.

Another reason for the extra pressure on resources is that mothers are getting older. In Scotland, for example, the number of births to women aged 45 or over more than tripled between 2001 and 2011. The number of babies born to women aged between 40 and 44 jumped 76 per cent.

England is the star when it comes to training new midwives.

Meanwhile, the number of babies born to the youngest women and girls has fallen dramatically. Wales saw a 34 per cent drop in births to girls aged under 16. Scotland saw a 24 per cent drop in babies born to women and girls aged under 20; in Northern Ireland it was 17 per cent, and in England that drop was 18 per cent. This pattern – of more births to older women and fewer births to girls and the youngest of women – has taken place across the UK.

The midwifery workforce is getting older too. In England, between 2002 and 2011, the proportion of midwives aged 45 or over jumped from a third to a half. The small number of midwives still working at the age of 65 or above jumped from 13 to 122. Thankfully a rise in the number of younger midwives may start to reverse this trend, but that influx will need to be maintained.

England is the star when it comes to training new midwives. The Government is planning a record number of places for new student midwives in 2012/13 – 2,578. This should help the number of midwives in training in England reach the 6,000 mark for the first time, a real milestone.

For 2010/11 Scotland has maintained training numbers above 200. We do not believe there to be a shortage of midwives across Scotland as a whole, but the ageing of the profession means that they do need to train enough new midwives to replace those approaching retirement. This could be a big problem in Scotland in the years to come; a problem that is currently camouflaged by the buoyant workforce.

Wales saw a trimming of training numbers in 2011/12 compared to the previous year. It is for this reason and the fall in midwife numbers there that the RCM is putting Wales on watch. We are not yet ringing the alarm bell, but we are poised to do so; decision-makers in Wales must turn this deteriorating situation around.

Northern Ireland trimmed the number of places too, in 2012, but the number is well up on recent years and we are confident that the growing midwifery workforce there is adequate to cope with demand. That said, we would warn against complacency; new midwives need to be brought in to replace those who will retire before too long.

As was the case last year, the situation is worst in England. Positive action however, namely increases in the number of midwives and in the number of midwives in training, means that the Coalition Government may be starting to turn things around. We wait in hope. Outside of England the tailing off of the baby boom presents an opportunity to improve care; no longer are services racing to catch up with the booming number of babies. Any trimming of resources however – as we are seeing in Wales – may squander the opportunity to improve care presented by the easing of the pressure from the dipping number of births.

We are also beginning to receive, at the end of 2012, anecdotal reports that some newly-qualified midwives are not able to find work as midwives in the NHS. We hope that this is temporary. Student midwives’ hard work and taxpayers’ money invested in their valuable training should not be squandered by a short-sighted approach to cost reduction. This would only short-change the mothers who need those new midwives. We will be able to tell you what happens about that in next year’s report.
The number of babies born in England in 2011 (688,120) was the highest for 40 years. Current official projections suggest the baby boom hasn’t yet run out of steam. By 2014, it is projected that the number of babies born in England will reach 743,000. If this proves correct, the number of births in England will have risen by 180,000, or almost a third, between 2001 and 2014.

The biggest rises since 2001 have occurred in London (up 28 per cent), the South West (up 25 per cent) and the East Midlands (up 24 per cent), although substantial rises have been seen in all English regions. In the last three years, the biggest rates of increase have been in the East Midlands, the South East and the South West.

Regional variation in births

Number of live births, 2001
Number of live births, 2011
Source: the Office for National Statistics
Note: official birth figures are released by region, not NHS Strategic Health Authority area, with the effect that figures for NHS South Central and NHS South East Coast are combined into a single South East region.
The number of babies born each year to women aged 40 or above jumped by more than 80 per cent between 2001 and 2011. The number of babies born to women in that age group in 2011 (29,350) was the highest since 1948. The number of babies born to women aged 30-34 was the highest on record, with records beginning in 1938.

Older mothers place greater demands on maternity services, with a greater likelihood of complications and the need for medical intervention.

It is worth noting too that since the start of the baby boom, the number of babies born to girls and women aged below 20 has fallen dramatically, by 18 per cent. In fact there were fewer births to this group than in any year since 1955.
The number of midwives is up. In 2012 there were the equivalent of 20,935 full-time midwives working in the NHS in England. This was up over 3,000 since the start of the baby boom in 2001. For most of the last decade, the midwifery workforce has risen slower than the number of births, though this has improved in recent years.

The good news: the shortage of midwives in England is coming down. We calculate that in 2011 the country was short of just shy of the equivalent of 5,000 full-time midwives; three years ago it was over 6,000. We now estimate the shortage to be at its lowest since 2005.

The bad news: we are still the equivalent of 5,000 full-time midwives short of where we need to be.
Midwives are getting older. Between 2002 and 2011, for example, the proportion of midwives aged 45 or over jumped from just over a third of all midwives to just below half of all midwives. The small number of midwives aged 65 or above has risen more than ninefold, from 13 to 122. Again, this trend has slowed with midwives aged under 25 now the fastest growing group.

Last year, in the first State of Maternity Services report, the Royal College of Midwives called on the UK Government to maintain the number of new places on midwifery training courses at its recent high level. We are very pleased that this is exactly what the Government has done. Each year we are now seeing around 2,500 new places for people wanting to start their training as a midwife, with a total of almost 6,000 people at some stage of their midwifery training. This will help to undo the damage of the deep cuts to training places in the middle of the last decade.
The response to the baby boom across the country has been patchy. In London, for example, the number of midwives has been increased by over half, to cope with the rising demand. South East Coast has seen a large increase, of 42 per cent, and the number of midwives in the East of England has risen by more than a third.

Other regions however have been slower out of the blocks. The North West has even seen a fall in midwife numbers of four per cent.

4% drop in the number of midwives in the North West between 2001 and 2012
As elsewhere, there have been particularly big rises in the number of births to older women. Births to women aged 45 or over have more than tripled, although these do make up a relatively small proportion of births. Meanwhile births to women aged 40 to 44 are up 76 per cent, and for women aged between 35 and 39 the increase is almost a quarter.

Again, as with elsewhere in the UK, the number of births to the youngest women and girls is down. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of women and girls under the age of 20 who have had babies fell 24 per cent, whilst at the same time the overall number of births was up 12 per cent.
The Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing has taken the decision to cut the annual intake of student midwives, as is clearly shown in this chart. This has been justified by the lack of jobs for newly-qualified midwives in Scotland. The availability of jobs in any one year however is not the whole story. The ageing of the midwifery profession means that we need to replace all those midwives who are fast approaching retirement. This needs to be done in good time, so that they can be trained and practising before we see the number of retirements start to climb as more and more midwives reach retirement age. We are calling on the Cabinet Secretary to increase student midwife numbers again.

Whilst it would appear that there has been a dramatic fall in midwife numbers in Scotland, we understand that much of this is due to NHS boards carrying out a large-scale data cleansing exercise.

Boards are now allocating midwives who work in neonatal, assisted conception and smoking cessation services to other staffing categories. As this is being done in a piecemeal fashion we can expect to see further uncertainty in future releases.

We look forward however to securing a more accurate portrayal of midwifery staffing in maternity services soon.
Whilst the baby boom has slowed the number of babies born in 2011 was still 16 per cent higher than in 2001. A decade of a rising number of births has left a legacy of additional pressure on the system.

As with other parts of the UK, Wales has seen a big rise in older women giving birth. The number of women aged 40 or over who gave birth in 2010 was up 63 per cent compared to 2001.

Again, as with elsewhere in the UK, the number of births to the youngest age groups was down. For the small number of mothers below the age of 16, the number of babies born fell from 93 to in 2001 to 61 in 2010. For those aged 16-19 the number of babies born was down 13 per cent, despite the overall rise in the number of births.
Midwife numbers fell in Wales in the last annual snapshot survey. In fact, 2011 was the third year in a row in which the number of midwives working in the NHS in Wales was cut; the number of midwives in 2011 was 12 per cent lower than in 2008.

Between 2001 and 2011 whilst the number of babies born jumped by just short of 5,000, the number of full time equivalent midwives rose by just 35.

In last year’s State of Maternity Services report we reported on an emerging shortage of midwives in Wales. We believe that this remained in 2011; whilst the number of births dropped a little, the number of midwives dropped too.

In 2011/12 the number of student midwives did fall by 10 places to 249, but the number of places has been climbing steadily in recent years. The number of places for new student midwives in 2011/12 – 249 – is up markedly from, say, 2005/06, when there were just 119 places.

Given the emerging shortage of midwives in Wales, the number of student midwife places needs to be sustained; any further cuts would put the future quality of maternity services at risk.
Northern Ireland

There were 25,273 babies born in Northern Ireland in 2011, up 15% or 3,311 on 2001. In three of the last four years – including in 2010 and 2011 – the number of births has topped 25,000.

It is important to note that in addition to these births, around an extra 500 babies are born in Northern Ireland each year to mothers resident in the Republic.

Number of live births, Northern Ireland

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Note: As with the rest of the report, this includes only the number of live births to usually resident mothers. However, in large part due to Northern Ireland’s shared border with the Republic of Ireland, a significant number of non-residents also give birth in Northern Ireland, increasing the pressure on maternity services. There were 460 births to non-residents in Northern Ireland in 2011.

Age profile of mothers

As elsewhere, there have been particularly big rises in the number of births to older women. Whilst the number of births to women aged 45 or over is down 10 per cent, this represents only a few dozen births out of a total of over 25,000. Big rises (of 33 per cent and 48 per cent) have been seen in the 35-39 and 40-44 age groups, respectively.

Again, as with elsewhere in the UK, the number of births to the youngest women and girls is down. Between 2001 and 2010 the number of women and girls under the age of 20 who have had babies fell 17 per cent, whilst at the same time the overall number of births was up 15 per cent.
It is good to see the number of midwives in Northern Ireland growing. At the latest count, taken during 2012, there were 1,040 full time equivalent midwives, which is the highest in recent years.

That stated, the overall rise in midwives in Northern Ireland, at seven per cent, is much lower than the 15 per cent rise in the number of babies being born. Thankfully however Northern Ireland has no shortage so is able to absorb the additional births with relative ease.

The midwifery workforce in Northern Ireland in 2012 is markedly older than the workforce was in 2001. As the graph clearly shows, the largest section is now aged in its early fifties, as opposed to the early forties at the turn of the century. Whilst we would not say there is a shortage of midwives in Northern Ireland, very obviously there is a need for the next generation of midwives to be trained and confident to practise long before many current midwives retire.
Whilst the number of training places for student midwives in 2012, at 60, is the lowest since 2007, it is still higher than it was at the start of the last decade. Our only real concern with Northern Ireland is the marked ageing of the midwifery profession in recent years. This situation needs to be closely monitored to ensure enough new midwives are trained in time to replace those who will leave in the coming years.
Our prescription

In England the baby boom just keeps on going. In fact, official projections suggest it has a long way still to climb. Provisional birth figures for the first half of 2012 back up those projections, with more babies likely to be born during the year than at any time since 1971.

Thankfully however the number of NHS midwives in England continues to climb, and following our request in last year’s State of Maternity Services report for training numbers to be protected we are very pleased that the Government in London went even further – actually increasing the number of places for new student midwives.

Added to that, the Department of Health in England has stated on the public record that there is further to go on upping the number of midwives. Maternity care has also been identified as a priority for the NHS in England. This is all very promising – there must not be any backsliding from the Government in London.

Outside England the baby boom does seem to have run out of steam, meaning midwives have more time to spend with the women for whom they care. Scotland and Northern Ireland have no overall shortage of midwives, and the shortage we have identified in Wales should be easily eliminated – and we call on the Government in Wales to do just that.

This is no time to take one’s eye off the ball however. Scotland and Northern Ireland might not have a shortage of midwives right now, but they have midwifery workforces that are rapidly ageing and fast approaching retirement. Those midwives will need to be replaced, and that is a long-term task. This is no time to cut back. Virtually halving training places for midwives in Scotland, for example, is hardly going to help – the Scottish Government should increase training numbers once again.

Increasingly too we are seeing a greater appreciation of the role of the midwife in improving public health. Midwives help women take the right steps – to stop smoking, for example – and help give babies the best start in life – by promoting breastfeeding. Midwives are there right at the start of life.

In England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland maternity care must be seen as more than just delivering babies. The vital work midwives undertake in the antenatal and postnatal periods must be valued too. That work must receive its fair share of resources, and cease to be run on a shoestring. This must happen in all four countries if important agendas on improving life chances in the early years of life are to be delivered.

As we made clear in last year’s State of Maternity Services report, maternity support workers (MSWs) have an important role to play in delivering quality maternity care. To do so safely however they must be adequately trained, suitably deployed and appropriately overseen, and their numbers should not typically exceed around 10 per cent of the clinical workforce. To ensure in particular that they are suitably overseen, it is important that midwife numbers continue to rise; recruiting MSWs faster than midwives could leave MSWs without the supervision and oversight needed to ensure they only carry out those duties they are able and safe to perform. MSW and midwife numbers must rise together.

- In England, the Government must keep up the good work and follow through on its undertaking to continue increasing midwife numbers. We are still around 5,000 midwives short of where we need to be. A corner is being turned in England; this is no time for backsliding.

- In Scotland, a cut in midwife training numbers must be reversed in future years.

- In Wales, the shortage of midwives that has emerged needs to be eliminated without delay. The Government in Cardiff should act now.

- In all four countries, midwives need to be given the resources to deliver on public health and improving the lives of children. Quality antenatal and postnatal care should be as important within maternity services as the birth itself. This is a moment of real opportunity to change lives for the better.