Executive summary

This is the third report in our annual State of Maternity Services series. Our two previous reports, the 2011 and 2012 editions, have set the standard as go-to points of reference for the latest numbers on NHS maternity services for each part of the UK. Over time the reports will serve as an evolving commentary on the changing state of maternity services; meantime they provide commentators and decision-makers with a snapshot of today’s maternity care.

The report is not a review of, say, structural changes. It has a very specific focus: the collation and interpretation of some of the basic numbers that tell the story of the state of maternity services.

England remains the problem child. The number of births in England continued to rise in 2012, reaching its highest number (694,241) since 1971. This was 23 per cent higher than 2001. London (up 29 per cent) along with the South West and the East Midlands (both up 25 per cent) are the regions that have seen the biggest rises.

In Scotland, births fell for the fourth year in a row, although remained 10 per cent higher than in 2001. In both Wales and Northern Ireland the number of births fell in 2012 for the second year in a row, but in both cases the number remained 15 per cent higher than it had been in 2001.

The very latest figures, for the first half of 2013, may however suggest that the baby boom in England is over. In the first six months of the year the number of births in England fell by 18,000, compared to 2012. Smaller falls in the first six months of 2013 were seen across the rest of the UK.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have thankfully not used the tailing off of their baby booms to cut midwife numbers. Whilst individual units or areas in those parts of the UK may be understaffed, overall they employ broadly the right number of midwives.

The effect of this higher number of births in England is multiplied by the growing complexity of pregnancies. Indeed, the importance of complexity on the midwifery workload has often been overlooked.

One example of rising complexity is the continuing growth of births to older women. In 2012, for example, there were 85 per cent more babies born to women in England aged 40 or over than there had been in 2001. In Scotland the rise for mothers aged 40 to 44 was 71 per cent over the same period, and 165 per cent for women older than that. In Wales the rise was 64 per cent for births to women aged 40 or over. And in Northern Ireland it was 64 per cent for women between the ages of 40 and 44, and 53 per cent to women above that age range.

Any falling away of the baby boom should not be seen as a reason to take a foot off the accelerator

Obesity is another area of growing complexity, which compounds the effect of the baby boom. The incidence of maternal obesity in the first three months of pregnancy in England, for example, more than doubled from 7.6 per cent to 15.6 per cent between 1989 and 2007. The result is an extra 47,500 women requiring more demanding care.

Our assessment of the shortage of midwives in the NHS in England in 2012, the latest full year for which we have both midwife and birth figures, is around 4,800. This is an improvement of 200 on last year. Indeed, this is the fourth year in a row in which the shortage has fallen, having stood at more than 6,000 in 2008.

This report also publishes for the first time a calculation, for England, of the difference between the number of births that took place in a year and the number of births for which the midwifery workforce during that year was suited. So, for example, in 2012 there were 694,241 babies born in England, but the number of midwives working in the NHS in that year was only really suitable for 565,245 births; meaning there were 128,996 more births than the service was designed to cope with. This puts any recent reduction in the number of births in context.

The total number of students studying midwifery has now topped 6,000 in England. That is good news, and needs to continue. The UK Government increased training places in England to a record level before letting them slip back in 2013/14; they should return the number of student places to their record level.

The fact that the NHS in England is thousands of midwives short of where it needs to be was confirmed in November 2013 by the publication of the National Audit Office (NAO) report, Maternity services in England. The report’s findings largely confirmed what the RCM has been saying for some years now.

Outside of England, we need politicians to ensure that they keep putting into NHS maternity services the resources required to maintain everything on an even keel, particularly keeping an eye on the age profile of midwives so that retirees are replaced in good time by newly-qualified staff.

Within England we need to see an explicit commitment to maintain and speed up the elimination of the midwife shortage. A cut in the shortage of 200 midwives in a year is okay, but it is by no means fast enough.

We need to see training numbers maintained at their current levels and newly-qualified midwives given employment not least because of the growing dropout rate amongst student midwives, as referenced in the NAO report.

Above all it is important for the RCM to communicate the fact that any falling away of the baby boom should not be seen as a reason to take a foot off the accelerator; instead, it should be seen as an opportunity to eliminate the shortage much faster.

We remain hopeful for better days ahead. It would appear that the baby boom may have ended, although birth numbers remain high. With the pressure easing, the opportunity is now here finally to eliminate England’s longstanding midwife shortage.

Between 2001 and 2012 the number of births each year rose by 130,497 (or 23 per cent). Last year (2012) saw more babies born in England (694,241) than any year since 1971. Figures for the first half of 2013 however show that the number of births is beginning to fall, compared to the same period in 2012, suggesting that the decade-long baby boom may have come to an end.

Regional variation in births

All but two English regions saw rises of above 20 per cent between 2001 and 2012, with the biggest rises seen in London (up 29 per cent) as well as the South West and the East Midlands (both up 25 per cent). The largest rises in the number of babies born each year were in London (up 30,024) and the South East (up 19,348).

The lowest rises over those 11 years were seen in the North East and the North West, but those rises were still 17 and 19 per cent respectively.
Previous State of Maternity Services reports revealed a trend towards women having babies later in life, and fewer giving birth in their teenage years. These trends are becoming more pronounced. Between 2001 and 2012, for example, the number of babies born in England to women aged 40 or over rose by 85 per cent (up 13,280).

The second-highest rise amongst the age groups was to women aged 35 to 39, with babies born to these women up 33 per cent. At the other end of the scale, babies born to women and girls aged under 20 fell 23 per cent during this period.

Older women require more assistance from midwives. They have a perfect right to all that additional care, of course, but it has an undeniable knock-on effect on workload, and that needs to be reflected in the number of midwives in the NHS overall.

The number of midwives is up. In 2012, at the annual snapshot date of 30th September, 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 RCM is willing to criticise where it sees the Government getting things wrong, but equally we want to praise where we see the Government getting things right.

On midwife numbers the Government is moving things in the right direction. Despite cuts elsewhere, we have seen a continued rise in midwife figures since 2010, continuing a rise that started under Labour. Indeed, there were 19 per cent (or 3,364) more midwives in 2012 compared to 2001. The number of NHS midwives in England is up over 1,200 since the 2010 election, but has dipped slightly in recent months; with the desperate need for more midwives, we do hope that this drop will prove temporary.

Midwives: the Coalition’s record

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Age profile of midwives

NHS midwives in England are getting older. The largest age group in 2001 was midwives aged between 35 and 39; the largest age group in 2012 was those aged 45 to 49. In other words, that large group is working its way through the system. Workforce planners need to ensure that this large group of midwives is replaced in advance of retirement.
The Coalition deserves praise for increasing the number of training places for midwives. The total number of student midwives in 2012/13 topped 6,000, which is excellent news.

In the most recent year (2013/14) the number has dropped slightly, which is a shame.

As stated earlier, the work to eliminate the shortage must be maintained; the RCM wants to see the number of places for new student midwives restored to its earlier, record level. There is absolutely no shortage of applicants for midwifery courses.

This report introduces a new measurement: the difference between the number of births that take place each year and the number of births for which the midwifery workforce is suited. So, for example, in 2012 there were 694,241 babies born in England, but the number of midwives working in the NHS in that year was only really suitable for 565,245 births; meaning there were 128,996 more births than the service was designed to cope with.

So, even if the baby boom has ended and the number of births falls in 2013, it would need to drop by around 130,000 before the need for more midwives no longer exists. The end of the baby boom, if that is what we are seeing, does not mean the end of the need for more midwives.
There is a big variation in how different parts of England have responded to the baby boom. The NHS in London, for example, increased the number of full time equivalent midwives between 2001 and 2012 by more than half; up from 2,633 to 4,006.

NHS South East Coast increased their midwife numbers by 42 per cent, or 479 midwives, and the East of England witnessed a 39 per cent boost, up from 1,501 to 2,082.

The smallest rise was seen in the North East (up just 5 per cent), although to be fair it went into the baby boom in a far healthier state than any other region.

The worst performer was the North West, where the number of midwives was actually cut by 117 midwives between 2001 and 2012, despite the number of babies born in the region jumping by 14,010 over the same period.
The changing age profile of women giving birth throughout the UK is perhaps at its most extreme in Scotland. The number of births to women and girls aged below 20, for example, fell 31 per cent between 2001 and 2012, from 4,444 to 3,074.

For older mothers, the care of growing numbers of whom is placing additional pressure on the NHS, rose dramatically in Scotland. The number of babies born to women aged between 40 and 44, for example, was up 71 per cent between 2001 and 2012; for the oldest age group (45+) the increase was 165 per cent, although for women of that age the numbers of birth are small (up from 40 to 106).

2012 was the fourth successive year in which the number of babies born in Scotland fell. The drop between 2008 and 2012 was not dramatic; the 2012 figure for births (58,027) was only 3.4 per cent off the 2008 peak (60,041), and the 2012 figure was still 10 per cent higher than 2001.
The number of training places for midwives in Scotland was cut. We accept that as reasonable however given that the NHS in Scotland employs sufficient numbers of midwives and the baby boom has tailed off.

Sensibly the Scottish Government has not exploited a small reduction (3.4 per cent over four years) in the number of births to slash midwife numbers. They have maintained them and we welcome the fact that they have taken that course of action.

We believe that the apparent fall in midwives shown in the chart is as a result of a large-scale data cleansing exercise, and that in recent months the figures have become much more accurate and trustworthy. The RCM believes that, when viewed as a whole, the NHS in Scotland employs enough midwives.

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The RCM will not simply call for more midwives, more student midwives and more funding whatever the circumstances. If we believe that a part of the UK employs enough midwives we will say so.
In 2012, the number of babies born in Wales fell; this was the second year in a row in which it had fallen. Between 2010 and 2012 however the fall was only 2 per cent, down from 35,952 to 35,238. The 2012 figure was still 15 per cent higher than 2001.

Wales has witnessed the same changes in the age profile of mothers seen elsewhere in the UK, i.e. fewer younger mothers, and more older mothers.

The small number of births to girls (those aged under 16) dropped 42 per cent between 2001 and 2011, from 93 to 54. There was a 23 per cent fall in births to the remaining teenagers (ages 16-19) from 3,075 in 2001 to 2,365 in 2011.

The biggest rise was to the oldest age group, in Wales that is 40+. The number of births to these women in Wales rose 64 per cent.
Since 2001 the number of midwives in the NHS in Wales has never been lower than 1,120 (in 2002) or higher than 1,323 (in 2008). In 2012 it stood at 1,223, up on the previous year and 8 per cent higher than 2001.

As with Scotland, we estimate that the NHS in Wales employs a sufficient number of midwives.

8% increase in midwives between 2001 and 2012

We are happy with midwifery training levels in Wales. The figures show a steady increase in places, which should ensure that those moving towards retirement are replaced long before they leave the profession with newly-qualified midwives who have the time to develop their skills, confidence and experience.
The situation with births in Northern Ireland is very similar to that of Wales. The number of babies born in Northern Ireland in 2012 (25,269) had fallen for the second year in a row, but by only a tiny amount (down 0.2 per cent in two years). As with Wales, the 2012 figure was 15 per cent higher than the number of births in 2001. So, as with not just Wales but Scotland too, birth figures in Northern Ireland in 2012 were on a raised plateau compared to recent years, slightly off the peak but well above figures from the start of the century.

The changes in the age profile of mothers in Northern Ireland between 2001 and 2012 were similar to other parts of the UK. Births to the youngest women and girls, those aged under 20, fell by 28 per cent. The largest rises were to the oldest two age groups; births to women aged 40-44 jumped 64 per cent and for women aged 45+ the number was up 53 per cent.
The number of midwives working in the NHS in Northern Ireland in 2012 was its highest since at least 2001, at 1,040. That was up 7 per cent, or 65 full time equivalent midwives, between 2001 and 2012.

The RCM believes that the NHS in Northern Ireland employs a sufficient number of midwives.

Midwifery in Northern Ireland is an ageing profession. Midwives falling into the following age bands – 25 to 29, 30 to 34, 35 to 39, and 40 to 44 – all formed a smaller proportion of the workforce in 2012 compared to 2001.

Interestingly the largest age group in 2001 was 40 to 44, whilst the largest age group in 2012 was 50 to 54, suggesting, possibly, that that represents a particularly large group within the profession in Northern Ireland who are all ageing together. That could present a workforce planning problem, and we would urge the Northern Ireland Executive to keep that under specific observation.
Whilst the latest – 2012 – student midwife figures are down on recent years, they are still higher than they were prior to 2008, and well above the levels seen at the start of the century.

As with Wales, we hope that this will ensure that new midwives can come into the profession in good time to replace those slowly heading towards retirement. This is something we may explore more in the preparation of the 2014 State of Maternity Services report.
Big rise in births to women over 40

- **71% increase** in births to women aged 40-44 in Scotland
- **165% increase** in births to women aged 45+ in Scotland
- **64% increase** in births to women aged 40-44 in Northern Ireland and Wales
- **53% increase** in births to women aged 45+ in Northern Ireland
- **85% increase** in births to women aged 40-44 in England

Not enough midwives to guarantee good quality care

In England, the shortage of midwives fell by only **200**, from **5,000** in 2011 to **4,800** in 2012.

**52% increase** in midwives in London

**4% decrease** in midwives in the North West