

**Accessing Maternity Services
during the COVID-19 Pandemic.**

**Independent research into what families in
St Helens experienced.**

Report, April 2021

Report produced by the
Healthwatch St Helens
Support Team



Background

A number of themes emerged from our research into what local people experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic when trying to access treatment. Some of the feedback was around maternity services.

In addition, we were aware that our local Clinical Commissioning Group (St Helens CCG) were working on developing the Maternity Voices Partnership and it was agreed that we would carry out some targeted research to gather the views and experiences of local families who were accessing maternity service during the pandemic.

What did we ask?

We wanted to ask mothers-to-be or new mums who had used maternity services within St Helens and Knowsley Trust - notably Whiston Hospital. The range of questions covered care at all stages of pregnancy, from antenatal, labour and delivery, and neonatal.

The questions targeted expected service delivery such as information provided, birth partner allowed to attend scans and the birth, and emotional support.

There was a total of 6 responses to the survey - 3 from the WA10 area of St Helens and 3 from the WA11 area. All respondents were at their antenatal stage at the time of this survey.

The survey is illustrated in Appendix 1.

What did they tell us?

All respondents felt the pandemic affected their maternity experiences - both positive and negative.

- 4 felt they were fully informed at each stage but 2 did not. No reasons were given.
 - Birthing partners were not allowed to attend appointments or scans with the exception of one woman who transferred to Ormskirk at 27 weeks and she was the only respondent whose partner was allowed to attend 2 scans due to complications with the pregnancy.
 - Not having a partner present at the scan was traumatic for one woman who was carrying twins and was alone when she was told her pregnancy was no longer viable.
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- Two women were not given a choice about where and how they could birth their babies, due to medical reasons (not related to COVID-19).
- The emotional support was seen as positive particularly for the women who had complications during their pregnancy, and especially if they had to be alone without a partner present.
- The midwife, consultant, community midwife and staff on FMAU staff were described as reassuring.
- One woman told us she was offered mental health support throughout.
- One woman told us she felt reassured throughout the pregnancy.

The following are comments from all respondents:

What worked well?

- Keeping Mum and baby safe
- Whiston Hospital has not insisted on phone appointments to avoid things being missed, so my complex needs have been well met.
- I went home the next day, so I did not have to stay there any longer than needed.
- Communication and care provided by staff to myself and my partner.
- Dedicated care staff as they were not focussing on helping/advising partners.

What needs to be improved?

- The labour experience.... if a birthing partner is allowed on the delivery suite, they should be able to stay on the ward afterwards.
 - My birth partner is my husband, we are in the same household. I don't understand why him coming with me increases the risk.
 - Midwives need more training on how to be sympathetic with patients.
 - There was a slight lack of support from midwives after being moved to ward 2E, unless monitoring you or your baby.
 - Please allow partners in, obviously symptom free, social distancing etc.
 - Consistency of midwife seen within the hospital (see same midwife so not re-telling your story constantly.)
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Do you think your maternity experience was affected by the pandemic?

- It is my first pregnancy, so I think it has but I have nothing to compare to.
- Yes - with previous pregnancy attended a lot of classes and support ie. Breast-feeding, husband at appointments
- Consistency of midwife seen within the hospital (see same midwife so not re-telling your story constantly.)

Further comments

- I think the maternity staff at Whiston are amazing, they are caring in difficult circumstances.
- Absolutely awful in Whiston still suffer panic attacks about it all now.
- The maternity department have done their utmost to make sure services are not adversely affected. Huge thanks!
- It's unfair that partners are allowed in other parts of the country whilst St. Helens people lose out.
- I think there needs to be some consideration for partners as there is a real disconnect with them not being in attendance of appointments.
- **The FMAU staff were viewed as professional and reassuring.**

Recommendations

- **Having the same midwife throughout the pregnancy.**
This reduces the need for women to retell their story and can potentially offer better emotional support through sharing the patient's journey.
 - **To allow birthing partners to attend scans in cases of difficult pregnancies so they can provide emotional support.**
 - **To allow birthing partners to attend delivery.**
 - **Check understanding when providing information.**
Patients and their birthing partners might not necessarily understand the information that is being given to them so checking they have understood helps them to feel better informed and aware.
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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank:

- The women who completed the survey
- St Helens GP practice managers who sent the link to the survey out to their patients.
- The Maternity Voices Partnership.
- Susan Ainsworth - Head of Midwifery, St Helens & Knowsley NHS Trust.

This report will be published on our website, and shared with key partners across the Borough, including commissioners, providers and the Care Quality Commission.

Disclaimer

Please note that the information contained in this report does not reflect the opinions of staff or volunteers from Healthwatch St Helens. It relates entirely to the views and experiences provided by the women who answered our survey.

Update and next steps

- Following discussion of the preliminary findings contained in the draft report, at the St Helens Maternity Voices Partnership (MVP) on 5th March 2021, the survey questions were reviewed and the survey was reopened on the Healthwatch website in. The MVP will be promoting this to gather more feedback.
- St Helens and Knowsley Trust will formally launch their newly established Community Birthing Team on 11th April 2021 and this service will focus on provided end to end care for women who choose to have a home birth, birth at the Midwifery led unit at Whiston Hospital or the Birthing Hub at Lowe House when this opens. This will help to ensure that women see the same group of midwives, to improve the continuity of their care.
- National guidance was released on 14th December 2020 around 'Supporting pregnant women using maternity services during the coronavirus pandemic: Actions for NHS providers'
<https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2020/12/C0961-Supporting-pregnant-women-using-maternity-services-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-actions-for-NHS-provi.pdf>

- The key headlines are that:

Pregnant women value the support from a partner, relative, friend or other person through pregnancy and childbirth as it facilitates emotional wellbeing and is a key component of safe and personalised maternity care. Women should therefore have access to support at all times during their maternity journey and Trusts should facilitate this, while keeping the risk of transmission of the virus within NHS maternity services (including to pregnant women, other service users and staff) as low as possible. This means welcoming the woman and her support person, regarding them as an integral part of both the woman and baby's care throughout and not as a visitor.

It includes making sure that women can safely take a support person to:

- *the early pregnancy unit*
 - *all antenatal scans*
 - *other antenatal appointments where the woman considers it important to have support*
 - *labour and birth from the point of attendance at the hospital or midwifery unit.*
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Women should also have access to support people while admitted for early pregnancy loss or on the antenatal or postnatal ward in line with pre-COVID Trust policies.

Parents of babies in neonatal critical care also need to be involved in their baby's care as much as possible.

The opening up of maternity services to partners again following the relaxing of COVID restrictions will help to improve the experience of both women and their partners throughout a woman's pregnancy. These changes will be in place from 12th April 2021.

The next steps are:

- To share this report with St Helens CCG and St Helens and Knowsley Trust.
- To table this report at the St Helens MVP meeting on 07/05/21.
- For St Helens MVP to review written information given to women to check that this is fit for purpose along with any further recommendations that come out of the next survey.

Healthwatch St Helens would like to thank CCG and MVP colleagues for providing updates in order to enhance this report.

The updated survey is currently live on the Healthwatch St Helens website and will be referred to as 'Phase 2'.

Appendix 1

Survey Questions

Have You Used Maternity Services during Covid-19?

1. Please state the first half of your postcode where you live
2. Where did you receive your maternity care? Please name the hospital.
3. Did you feel you feel fully informed at each stage?
4. Was your birthing partner allowed to attend appointments with you?
5. Was your birthing partner allowed to attend scans with you?
- 6 Any comments about your birthing partner allowed to attend scans with you?
7. Were you offered choices on where and how to have the birth of your baby?
- 8 If not please give reasons.
9. Was your partner allowed to attend the birth?
10. Were you given emotional support during these stages?
- 10 a. Any comments about the emotional support during these stages?
11. Who as a health professional provided you with emotional support? For example - GP, Midwife, Health Visitor, Consultant. Please indicate.
12. Were you allowed visitors in hospital following the birth of your baby?
13. Was your mental health affected by the covid-19 pandemic?
- 13a. Any comments about your mental health during the covid-19 pandemic?
- 14a. From your experience of maternity services, please tell us one thing what worked well
- 14b. From your experience of maternity services, please tell us one thing what needed improvement
15. Was your experience of maternity services affected by the covid-19 pandemic?
16. Did you feel your maternity experiences were affected by the pandemic?

Please feel free to make any further comments which were not covered by the above.

Appendix 1 continued

If you wish a member of our team to get in touch with you, please leave your name and contact details below.

If you would like to become a member of Healthwatch St Helens and receive monthly newsletters about health and social care, please complete the box below.

St Helens Maternity Voices Partnership

St Helens Maternity Voices Partnership (MVP) is a local action forum which brings together all those who use, provide and commission maternity services. The purpose of Maternity Voices is to contribute to the development and provision of safe and high quality services for women and families.

The local MVP advises the maternity services on all aspects of the maternity services including:

- The plans for Maternity service developments and improvements.
- Progress on implementing national policy and evidence based care recommendations.
- The views of women and families on the delivery of the maternity services.

Video or telephone meetings are held on a bi-monthly basis, other opportunities will be considered in accordance with COVID 19 recommendations.

If you would like to be involved in this group then please leave your name and contact details below.

Contact us

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Please note that the Healthwatch St Helens Support Team are currently working from home but we can still be contacted by telephone, email or through our website.
