

**Accessing Maternity Services
during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
Phase 2**

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

Report, 2021

Report produced by the
Healthwatch St Helens
Support Team



Background

Towards the end of 2020, we ran a survey about local families' experiences of using Maternity Services during the COVID-19 pandemic. We didn't get the best response to the survey, in terms of the number of responses we received, however we were able to identify some common themes.

When we presented the Report to the Maternity Voices Partnership (MVP), it was agreed by all that it was an important piece of work and we were asked to run the survey again, but this time with a commitment from the MVP, (which was only just getting set up when we ran the first survey), to help us reach as many women as possible and hopefully get a wider view of what they were experiencing.

This report is based on Phase 2 of the work that Healthwatch St Helens has carried out around maternity services. The survey went live again in April 2021, and we received 90 responses. All respondents were new Mums at the time of this survey, so were able to give their experiences throughout their pre-natal to post-natal stage.

What did we ask?

As in the first survey, we wanted to know what mothers-to-be or new mums who had used maternity services provided by St Helens and Knowsley Trust had experienced, while restrictions were in place due to COVID-19. 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.

The survey is illustrated in Appendix 1.

What did they tell us?

The impact of COVID-19 was restrictions being placed on the presence of birth partners, no visitors, and fewer staff. The overwhelming response was expressing feelings of loneliness, isolation and anxiety triggered by not having a partner present during appointments, scans especially if it was not good news, and some fear if it was their first pregnancy or a second pregnancy after a miscarriage or stillbirth. These feelings were heightened

when giving birth alone without partners present. In some cases, anxiety medication was given, and in a few cases it led to post-natal depression.

A few people said that Whiston Hospital were slow to update their policy on COVID-19 regulations despite the Government stating that partners could be present at appointments and during birth.

Generally, ante-natal care fared better than post-natal care. Emotional support was given mainly by midwives and health visitors.

As always there are differing views on staff in terms of care and compassion. Staff were mainly described as ‘amazing’ as one Mum who gave birth alone said; *‘Thank you to the midwife who delivered my son on Christmas Day - I could not have done this without her!’*

Another lady said, *‘It was a horrendous experience, I nearly died in labour and was left to suffer by hospital staff for 3 hours.’*

In many cases, women acknowledged that there was a shortage of staff and appreciated they had to do their job in difficult circumstances.

Communication was an area which felt could be improved especially between departments and midwife to midwife. Also, it was felt more information about what to expect at induction would have helped. The Sapphire Suite was seen as a beautiful space where mums felt they could talk about anything and felt listened to.

The following are comments from respondents, in their own words:

What worked well?

- Convenient ultrasound appointment times and places.
 - Delivery midwives were amazing
 - Encouraged for water birth due to my circumstances - best thing I ever done.
 - Excellent services, fantastic staff and made my birth experience the way I always wanted it.
 - First pregnancy. Had no previous experience
 - Getting baby weighed and baby clinic to reassure all is okay and to speak to a HV regular
 - I cannot fault the service only I was very disappointed my partner could not attend at least one scan and I wasn't allowed a video.
 - I got to leave the same day of birth
 - Knowledge
 - Midwife appointments
-

- Midwives at the hospital
 - Midwives were all lovely and helpful
 - More staff made me feel looked after
 - My experience of triage - I was cared for quickly which made all the difference to my preterm birth
 - Parents in mind- emotional support
 - Pre-natal care was excellent. Staff explained everything really well
 - Promptness of being checked over and how thorough everyone was
 - Quick discharge from hospital (as a third time mum this was fine for me)
 - Referral to foetal medicine after Ventriculomegaly was found.
 - Safety and wellbeing of myself and the baby
 - Sapphire suite was beautiful.
 - Sapphire Suite was wonderful and relaxed
 - Some of my aftercare.
 - Staff on delivery ward and prior to caesarean were amazing.
 - Staff were amazing
 - Sticking to appointments by time.
 - The birth and organising
 - The lateral flow tests, results come back in 30 mins before visiting.
 - The maternity ward
 - The midwifery led unit I felt more than comfortable
 - The phone booking in appointment
 - The staff in the maternity ward, particularly afterwards were focused on maintaining their level of care despite difficult circumstances
 - The staff of FAU are incredible.
 - The staff were perfect at Whiston made the whole pregnancy a breeze with all information needed
 - The support and guidance from staff.
 - The surgeons and anaesthetic team during my c section. Extremely professional and empathetic
 - The theatre staff were fantastic and the support of everyone on ward 2E during my stay.
 - Very professional
 - When multiple appointments/scans were needed, they were booked together to reduce number of visits to the hospital
 - Post-natal support by midwives and support staff on the ward was great.
 - Pre-pregnancy care was great
 - My midwife - giving birth to my son without my partner present - I couldn't have done without her.
 - Partners allowed into the delivery suite and pick-up at the ward door.
-

What needs to be improved?

- A new mum on my ward was treated the same as me and I thought she needed much more support and guidance.
 - Access for fathers during and post birth
 - Advice on taking pain relief following my c-section and breastfeeding. I was not told that taking codeine would be a problem
 - As a first-time mum I felt overwhelmed and unsure of things at times felt staff could have helped more
 - Being checked by the midwife being cared for and looked after and listening to problems - keep an eye on the baby's and mum's health
 - Being more sensitive to pregnant ladies that were alone during their maternity appointments
 - Cannot find fault
 - Clear instruction on what is happening and your choices and implications of these choices
 - Clearer information on induction
 - Communication between departments.
 - Cover for my community midwife who constantly had to shield and no cover was provided.
 - Covid rules
 - Covid swabbing when patients have already had covid
 - Dads allowed on wards after birth
 - Dads should not have been stopped. It is their child also. We just carry it.
 - First pregnancy. Had no previous experience.
 - Hard to say as my disappointments were due to COVID
 - I got left in the gown I gave birth in over-night and no help to get changed until the next day I was numb from the waist down!
 - I think a bit more contact would work better
 - I would have liked my partner at least 1 scan or to video it but we were not allowed to.
 - Leaving patients alone in induction to go to 4cm plus
 - Longer time for partner to be with baby when born, only 2 hours, then couldn't visit
 - Many staff assumed that I knew about processes and experience of pregnancy
 - Midwives communication during active labour.
 - Partners being involved and allowed to appointments and scans
 - Partners to be more included in what is happening at each stage
 - Post-natal care, not one person checked my stitches
 - Quicker pain relief available on arrival to labour ward.
 - Rude staff, staff clearly over worked, under-staffed, hospital food, lack of empathy
 - Scan team-midwife communication
 - Scanning experiences
 - Sharing of information and consistency of it. A friend gave birth 2 days before me, in the same hospital and we had different rules.
 - Staffing on the ward and delivery suite
-

- Support following birth was terrible. My baby was critically ill and this was not picked up on due to a lack of communication.
- The after care for mothers who's new-born is taken so special baby and they are placed in a bay without their child.
- The communication between professionals, reading a patient's notes before the appointment so you know the history
- The support
- The waiting area for partners when taken lateral flow tests as he was told to go for a walk for 15mins
- There are times when communication could have been better.
- Turn the lights out on the wards earlier (I'm struggling to find a complaint)
- When in labour having to leave partner, I would stress without him as slow labour the 4cm rule resulted in husband missing birth.
- Post-natal care was non-existent.
- Allowing partners to scans and appointments. It's their baby too!
- The Trust was slow to make changes to regulations, despite the Government saying that partners should be allowed to attend.
- Sent home the day after I had my caesarean. This was after I had expressed concerns about be unable to breastfeed.
- Only that my partner couldn't attend appointments and scans.
- I felt support from the staff on the ward wasn't as good as when I had my last baby in 2018.

Do you think your maternity experience was affected by the pandemic?

100% of respondents felt that their maternity experiences was affected by the pandemic. Examples of comments reflecting how they felt.

- "Absolutely. I spent 6 days in hospital most alone. My partner had to leave as soon as I left recovery. It was awful."
 - "Partners not being allowed in scans to share the joy."
 - "Yes, had to do everything alone which after having fertility treatment felt lonely".
 - "Yes, I had to attend scans weekly due to an issue with my daughter's growth. I was given difficult news about this on many occasions."
 - "Still absolutely devastated at my experience."
-

Recommendations

Improved Communication

- Better advice, information and clearer instruction.
Examples.
 - Not informed that codeine should not be taken as pain relief following C-section.
 - Assuming the patient knows the processes of pregnancy and birth.
- During labour
- Between midwives
- Between departments - scan team and midwives.
- More regular contact by looking in on the patient during the hospital stay.

Post-natal support to be as good as antenatal support.

Develop a culture where:

- **All patients feel supported at all stages**
“Being someone who’s had miscarriages before and is high risk it was a very daunting time that was very lonely”.
“Felt lonely and stressed as I felt I was going through the pregnancy on my own. Felt disconnected from my partner.
“We discussed COVID, that was it. I suppose the midwife did ask about my mental health at every visit”.
 - **All patients feel they are treated with dignity and respect**
“Doctors [need] to respect mothers’ wishes and not make them feel stupid”.
“I got left in the gown I gave birth in overnight and no help to get changed until the next day”.
 - **Patients always feel informed.**
“I wish I had been given detailed information regarding induction.”
“First pregnancy. Had no previous experience”.
“As a first-time mum I felt overwhelmed and unsure of things at times.”
-

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank:

- The women who completed the survey
- The Maternity Voices Partnership.
- Everyone who shared the survey on our behalf.

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

While we have included some quotes from women who completed our survey, a complete list of comments and feedback has been forwarded to the Maternity Voices Partnership.

Update and next steps

- ✓ We'll publish the report on the Healthwatch website and share it with NHS local commissioners, service providers and their patient experience teams.
- ✓ Maternity staff in Whiston Hospital will be made aware of the feedback. The key themes will feed into the feedback action plan, to identify what action needs to be taken. Maternity matrons from Whiston Hospital will give feedback to the MVP on progress made on that plan.
- ✓ The MVP Chair will use this feedback to inform conversations with various service providers around what service users want and need. For example, key themes of this survey have already been used to inform discussions around perinatal mental health and antenatal care.
- ✓ Various support groups will share the themes from this survey with their users, to help them understand that they are not alone, and that their voices are being heard.
- ✓ The MVP will continue to monitor service user feedback to see where things are improving and where further action is required.
- ✓ Healthwatch St Helens will continue to provide feedback received around maternity services to the MVP.

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.

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 were 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

Healthwatch St Helens

The Beacon, College Street, St Helens, WA10 1TF

Telephone: 0300 111 0007

Email address: info@healthwatchsthelens.co.uk

Twitter: @HWStHelens

Facebook: [facebook.com/@Healthwatchsthelens](https://www.facebook.com/@Healthwatchsthelens)

Website: www.healthwatchsthelens.co.uk

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.
