

Enabling safe quality midwifery services and care in Northern Ireland Response of the UK network of Professors in Midwifery and Maternal and Newborn Health

The UK network of Professors in midwifery and maternal and newborn health welcome the recent [independent report into midwifery and maternity services in Northern Ireland](#), led by Professor Mary Renfrew.

The report highlighted serious failings in maternity services that our members are familiar with throughout the UK. The report highlights a systemic lack of investment and lack of importance given to maternity services. Systemic failures were identified in the organisation and structures of maternity care. These included a lack of personalised care, fragmented care provided by multiple individuals, a disconnect between acute hospital and community services, lack of co-ordination, and staffing levels that are inadequate for the current model of care, especially affecting the workload of midwives. These factors are contributing to an inability to meet the basic needs of women, including preventive care and information in pregnancy and care and support following birth, and cause distress to staff. Inadequate scrutiny and availability of data has contributed to senior levels of the system not having all the information needed to understand the problems encountered by women, families, and staff.

The investigation used methods to ensure the voices of women, partners, advocacy and community groups, midwives, students, interdisciplinary staff, senior decision-makers and key organisations were heard and shaped the recommendations. It considered relevant evidence and worked closely with service user advocates, interdisciplinary colleagues from across Northern Ireland, and expert colleagues from across the UK to identify the underlying causes of problems and to inform effective sustainable solutions. The report, the first of its kind to take a whole-system and evidence-informed perspective, found current and ongoing serious weaknesses in the provision and organisation of maternity care in Northern Ireland. The findings resonate with concerns previously highlighted in other parts of the UK. These include, midwives and other health professionals working in under-resourced, outdated and fragmented systems that limit the care that they are able to provide and that do not support the required high standards of maternity care for women, babies and families.

The report also identified positive examples of good practice where staff and services are working well, and where there are important lessons to learn for future service provision. These examples help identify what needs to change to keep women and staff safe. Characteristics of positive service provision have been identified and should be used to inform this work.

Women should be able to expect respectful, kind, individualised, supportive, evidence-informed, relationship-based care and services across the whole maternity journey, from pre-pregnancy, through to postpartum care. In current stretched services the full scope of midwifery care is not valued and is not being provided to

families. All staff groups wish to provide evidence-based high-quality care but require better support, leadership, and education. These changes can be achieved but only with necessary investment and system change, support for midwifery managers and opportunities for midwives at all levels to practice to their full scope. The system must listen to the voices of women and of midwives. It must focus on the needs and wishes of women and families at all stages of the continuum of care, genuinely involving them in the design and monitoring of services.

The report proposes an ambitious evidence-based plan to transform the maternity systems of Northern Ireland. The plan will ensure safe quality care in all settings including the safe provision of community midwifery units and home births, with change underpinned by strong strategic leadership, improved data and monitoring, and building for the future. Interdisciplinary education and relevant audit, evaluation and research are essential to ensure safe, effective, equitable care and services and to answer the questions raised about current service provision.

This report is relevant to every health system, and there are important lessons for all UK countries and for future reviews of maternity services. The Northern Ireland government has accepted the report's findings and has pledged to implement the recommendations. We hope the necessary actions will now be taken at all levels, to ensure future maternity services in Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK can support women and families on their important journey through pregnancy to parenthood. The UK network of professors in midwifery and maternal and newborn health will welcome opportunities to contribute to this important work.