

Board of Community Health Councils in Wales

Maternity services in Wales: What CHCs have heard during the coronavirus pandemic

October 2020



Accessible formats

This report is also available in Welsh. If you would like this publication in an alternative format and/or language, please contact us. You can download it from our website or ask for a copy by contacting our office.

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Introduction

Community Health Councils (CHC) are the independent watchdog of NHS services in Wales. We encourage and support people to have a voice in the design and delivery of NHS services.

CHCs seek to work with the NHS, inspection, and regulatory bodies. We provide an important link between those who plan and deliver NHS services in Wales, those who inspect and regulate it and those who use it.

CHCs hear from the public in many different ways. Before the coronavirus pandemic, we regularly visited NHS services to hear from people while they were receiving care and treatment. CHCs also heard from people at local community events, and through community representatives and groups.

Since the coronavirus pandemic, CHCs have focused on engaging with people in different ways.

This includes surveys, apps, video conferencing and social media to hear from people directly about their views and experiences of NHS services, as well as through community representatives and groups.

There are 7 CHCs in Wales; each one represents the “patient and public voice” in a different part of Wales.



What we did

During the coronavirus pandemic, one of the ways people have been able to share feedback with us about their views and experiences of NHS care is by completing our national [survey](#), or by contacting us via phone, email and website.

The feedback we receive directly through this national survey is only one way in which CHCs hear from people locally about their NHS services, including maternity care.

CHCs pick up feedback and issues in other ways, eg., through our enquiries and complaints advocacy service, local community networks, community representatives and groups, and monitoring of health board activities, including feedback and complaints.

So that services can respond quickly, CHCs share with their health boards what they are hearing from people in their local communities on an on-going basis. At a national level, we meet with the Welsh Government weekly to discuss what we are hearing across Wales and the actions needed.



What we have heard during the pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, people have been incredibly supportive of their NHS staff. CHCs consistently heard wide public recognition and appreciation of the commitment and determination of healthcare workers to provide the best possible care and treatment to people across Wales during this unprecedented situation.

Overall, people knew and understood that the way they would usually access and receive maternity services needed to change so that the NHS could respond effectively to coronavirus.

People also knew that some of the important things they value in the way in which maternity services are usually provided were no longer possible in the same way.

Whilst people told us they understood things had to change, we also heard how this was affecting them. We heard that for some people this was not only affecting their experience of antenatal care and labour, but also on their on-going care and support after birth.

They may also be missing out on developing some of the supportive and life changing relationships new parents often make with other new parents in the community.

Overall, this can increase their feelings of vulnerability and fundamentally on their mental health and well-being.

Here is one woman's experience of pregnancy that shows much of what we heard in the earlier stages of the pandemic:

Here is one woman's experience of pregnancy that shows much of what we heard in the earlier stages of the pandemic:

I am currently 35 weeks pregnant, I am under consultant led care and can honestly say the care I have received during the pandemic has been brilliant.


I have growth scans every 4 weeks, followed by an appointment with my consultants registrar. Scans and blood tests are now carried out in 1 department, which I feel is much better as walking to different departments around the hospital while heavily pregnant with SPD and pre-existing back conditions can be very difficult.

I am also having appointments with my midwife at my GP surgery every 2 weeks, which again has been faultless. My only "complaint" is that my husband cannot attend any scans or appointments with me, although I completely understand the reasons for it, it is still very upsetting to not have him involved in the scans or appointments.

We also saw some differences in the approaches taken by individual health boards, both in terms of the level and nature of involvement of partners and the level of support for and encouragement of home births during this period. As the NHS worked together in response to the situation, we started to see a more consistent picture.

During pregnancy

We heard from people who felt fully supported and cared for throughout their pregnancy, despite the challenges everyone faced:




"I had a very good experience throughout my pregnancy. The level of care was fantastic. I was under consultant led care and both midwives and doctors were fantastic. They were really thorough and I felt like I was really looked after.

My community midwife was again fantastic. She was always there when needed and if she couldn't answer the phone she would always ring me back as soon as she could.


I felt really looked after. On the occasions I needed to be monitored (due to reduced movements), every midwife looking after me was very caring, explained everything to me and were really supportive.

“My community midwife and the midwives I've seen at hospital appointments have been so lovely and have made me feel at ease during this difficult time.”





"I had my baby girl on 10th June 2020. Every appointment (and I had a lot) I felt safe and everything run so smoothly so I was never hanging around the hospital longer than I needed to be."



"Ongoing antenatal care has been amazing. Plenty of friendly advice and support in these worrying times"

Some people told us their appointments and on-going care continued successfully, even if it took a little getting used to:

"I was in my second trimester at the start of the lockdown now into my last couple of weeks. I've been lucky that all of my antenatal appointments have continued as planned, just without my husband being able to attend with me."

Midwives at Princess of Wales were fantastic, my community midwives in the Glan y Mor team went above and beyond to ensure I received the best care

"I had my 28-week scan at Princess of Wales hospital on Monday 6th April. I cannot speak highly enough of the care I received, all staff were in full PPE, which was initially a little daunting, but I was put at ease immediately and the care I received throughout my visit was superb"



For others, the changes that had to be made quickly at the start of the pandemic meant that all of a sudden they didn't have the level of contact they had been expecting. This meant they felt more anxious and a little forgotten about.

If this was a first pregnancy, not wanting to be a bother and not feeling able to contact health services to ask questions made things more difficult:

"I understand that things have been very testing for the health board however; I have found myself with little support during the pandemic. This is my first pregnancy and I am currently 25 weeks pregnant, I have not had a face-to-face appointment with my midwife since I was 7 weeks pregnant.

I have been feeling a bit let down and feel as though I do not want to waste the services time for simple queries as they are probably dealing with many emergencies. I think that during this time it may have been helpful to have more contact than normal with a midwife, as we are anxious and nervous about what is happening. I understand face-to-face appointments are not possible but a couple of phone calls may have helped. I also called my doctors surgery at 20 weeks pregnant as I thought I had a urine infection, the surgery advised me they didn't even know I was pregnant.

I know I'm not the only expecting mother currently feeling this way but I do feel slightly let down."

Sometimes more experienced mothers also felt the impact of less contact, particularly if they had been told their pregnancy was high risk:

"Shortly after finding out I was pregnant the UK went into a lockdown due to the coronavirus and because of this our maternity care practically ceased. From normal routine appointments to scans and consultant appointments.

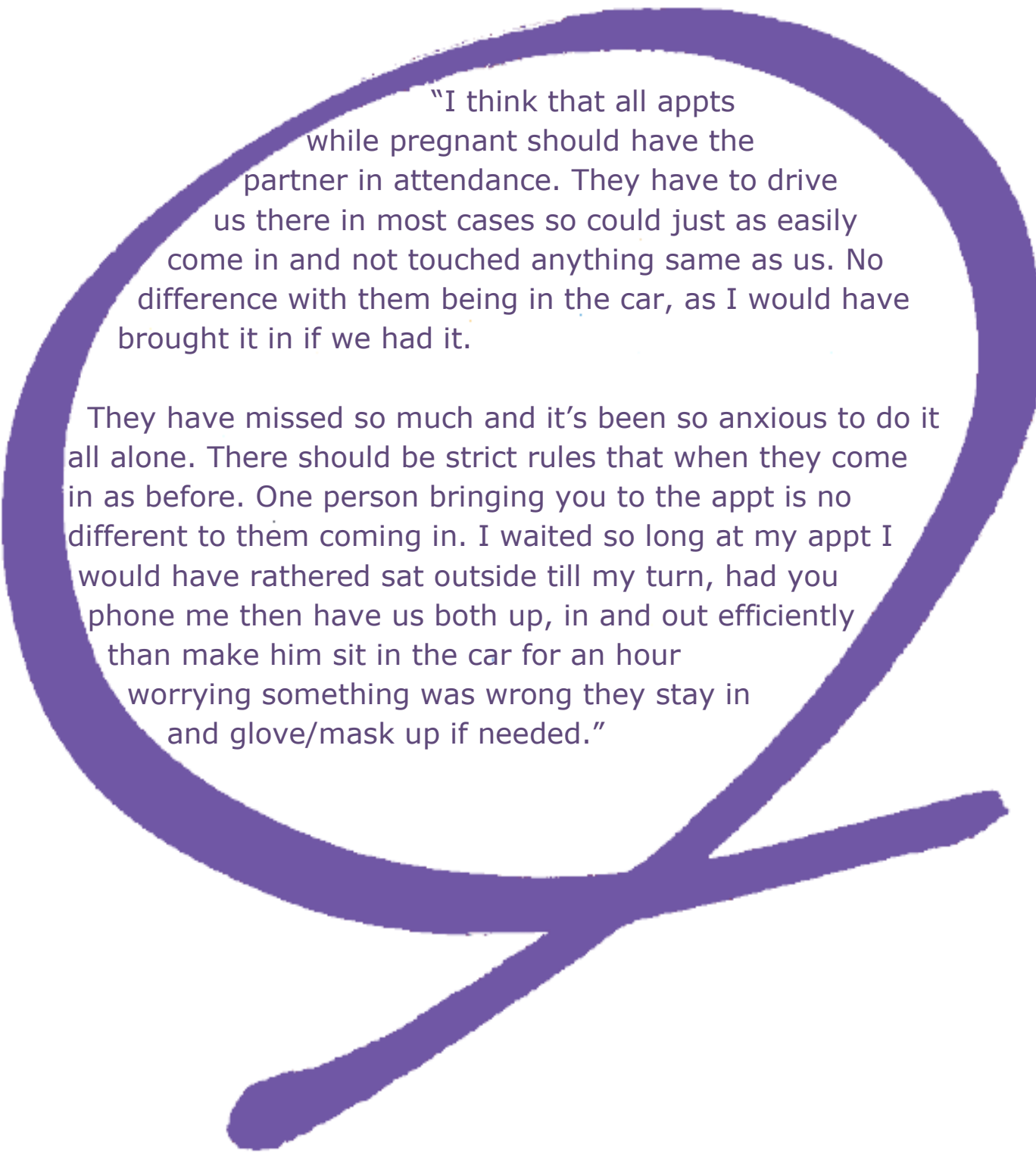
Personally, I feel like we have been forgotten about. Before the coronavirus, these appointments were essential for the welfare of mother and baby.

How is it now acceptable for women to [not] receive these services? I am now currently 8 month's pregnant, high risk and consultant led.

I have had growth scans cancelled, I've seen a consultant once at 9 weeks, I have had one antenatal check-up. I am a third time mother so I kind of know what I'm doing but I'm no professional and I feel like we have just been left in the dark.

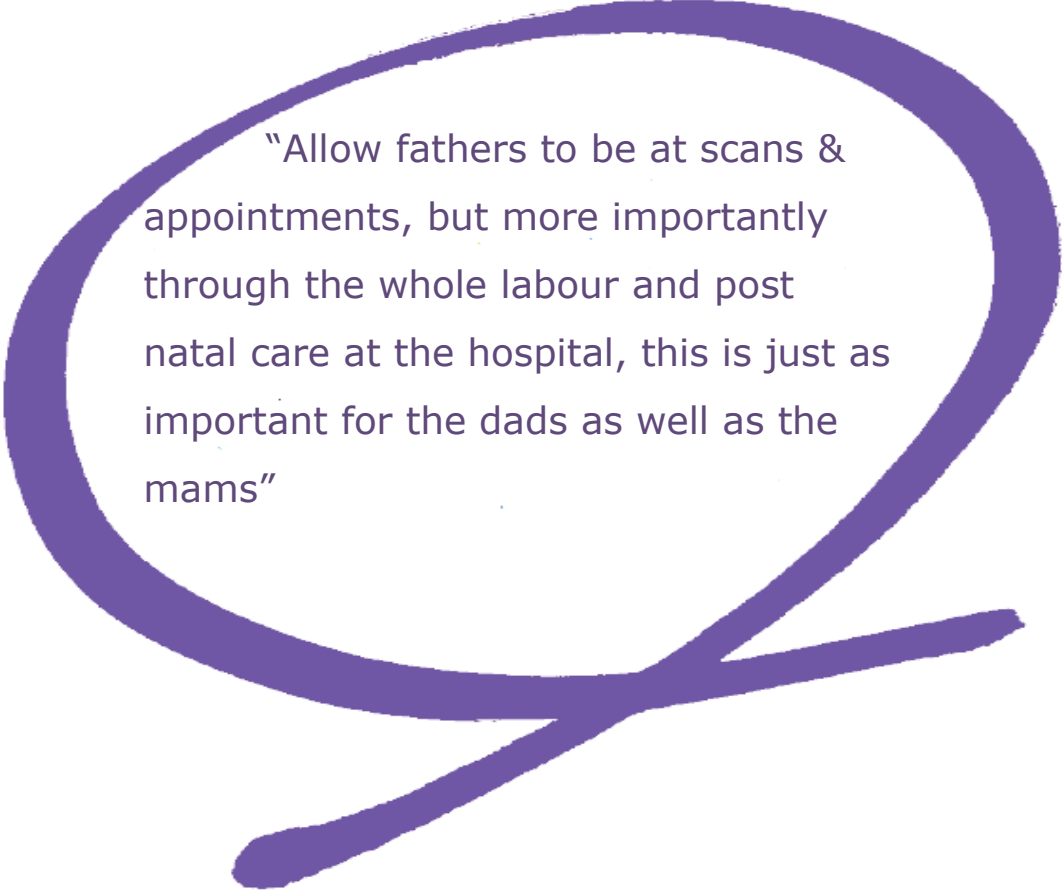
In my opinion if we need these essential appointments beforehand why on earth have we not had them now."

Most of all, we heard about the anxiety and impact on families of not being able to have partners and loved ones involved in antenatal appointments, including scans:

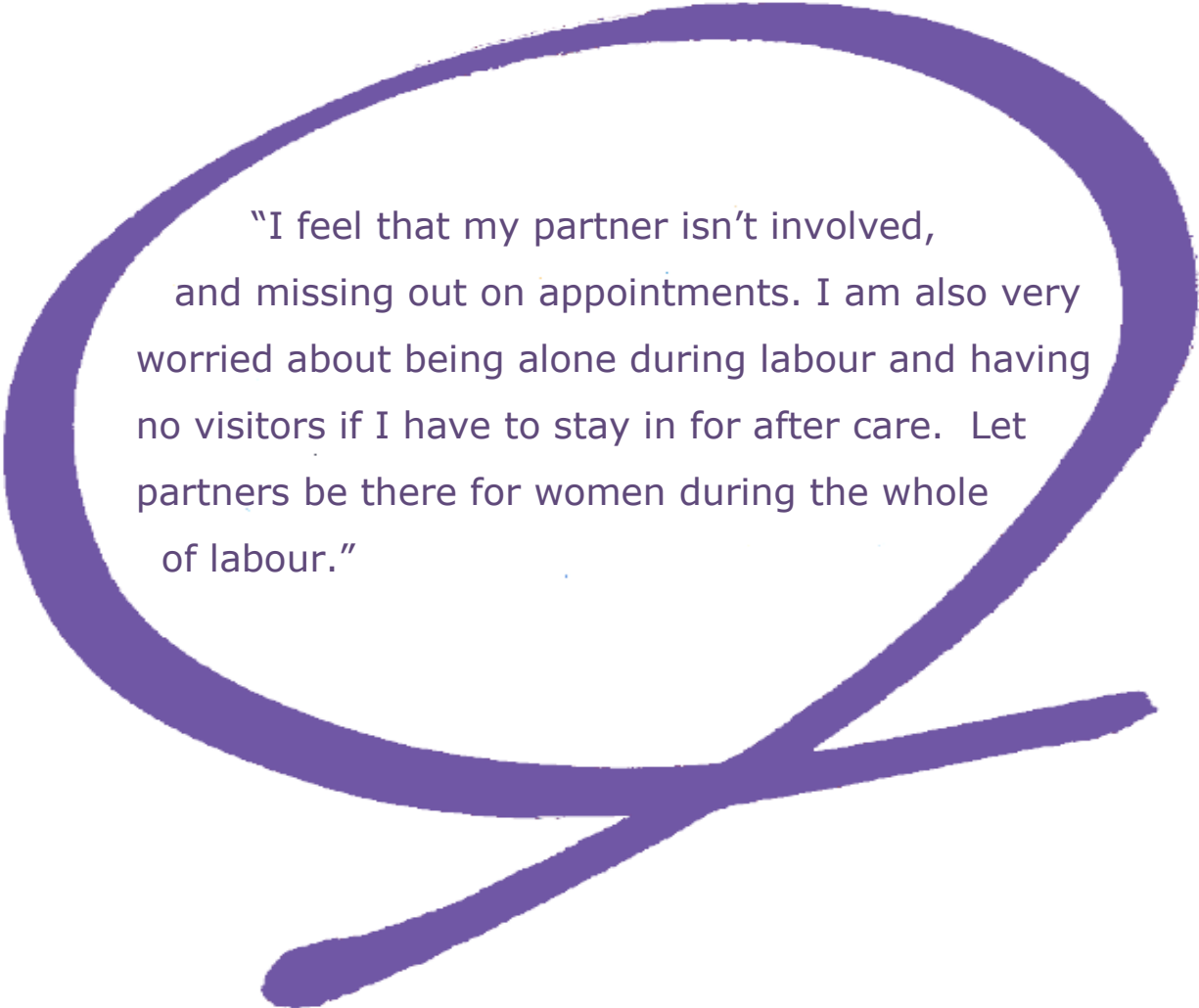


"I think that all appts while pregnant should have the partner in attendance. They have to drive us there in most cases so could just as easily come in and not touched anything same as us. No difference with them being in the car, as I would have brought it in if we had it.

They have missed so much and it's been so anxious to do it all alone. There should be strict rules that when they come in as before. One person bringing you to the appt is no different to them coming in. I waited so long at my appt I would have rathered sat outside till my turn, had you phone me then have us both up, in and out efficiently than make him sit in the car for an hour worrying something was wrong they stay in and glove/mask up if needed."



“Allow fathers to be at scans & appointments, but more importantly through the whole labour and post natal care at the hospital, this is just as important for the dads as well as the mams”



“I feel that my partner isn’t involved, and missing out on appointments. I am also very worried about being alone during labour and having no visitors if I have to stay in for after care. Let partners be there for women during the whole of labour.”



Giving birth

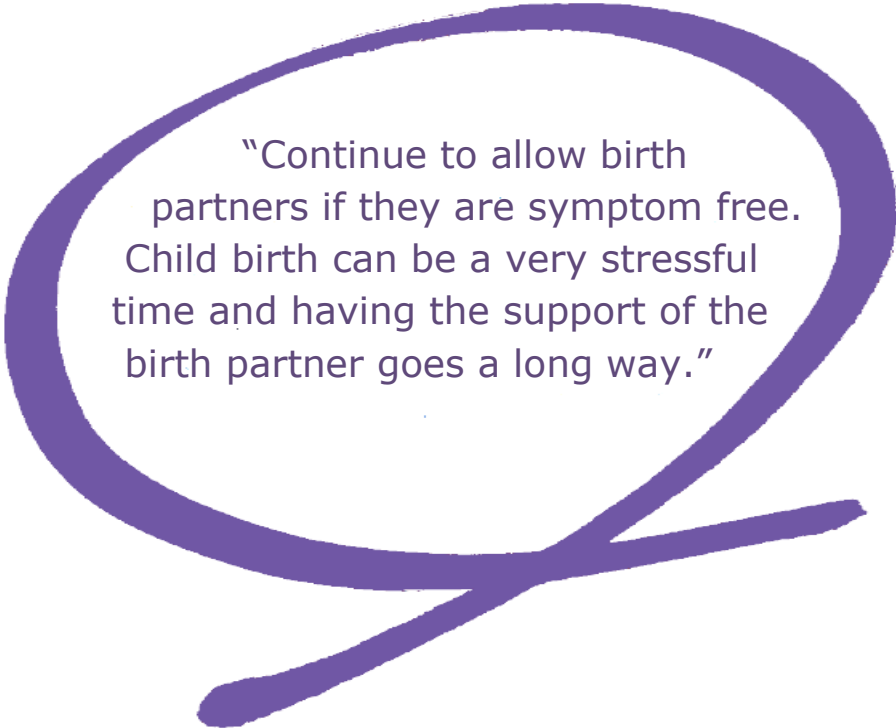
We heard from people who were very grateful to healthcare workers for the care and support they provided when giving birth during the pandemic:

We are so lucky to have such wonderful maternity staff working in our health board and I'm truly grateful for everything they have done for us as a family"

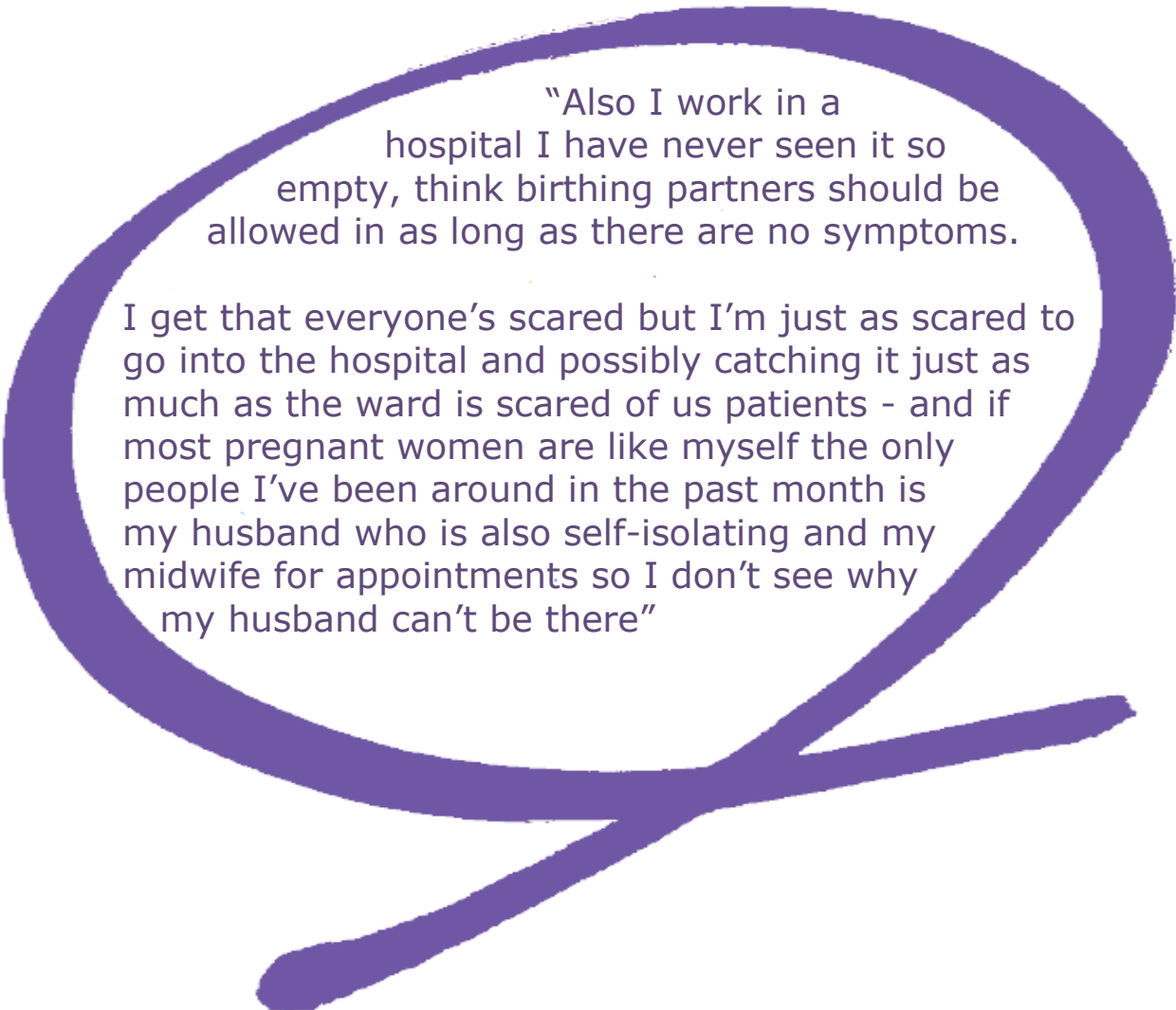
"The care I received when I had my son was excellent and I thank the midwives and doctors of princess of Wales."

"During the birth everyone was very calm even though they had the stress of the coronavirus pandemic on their minds. I had a wonderful birth experience and I can't thank those involved enough.

Once again, in the earlier stages of the pandemic women told us they were worried about giving birth without having their birth partner with them throughout, and were not always clear why their attendance couldn't be managed safely:



"Continue to allow birth partners if they are symptom free. Child birth can be a very stressful time and having the support of the birth partner goes a long way."

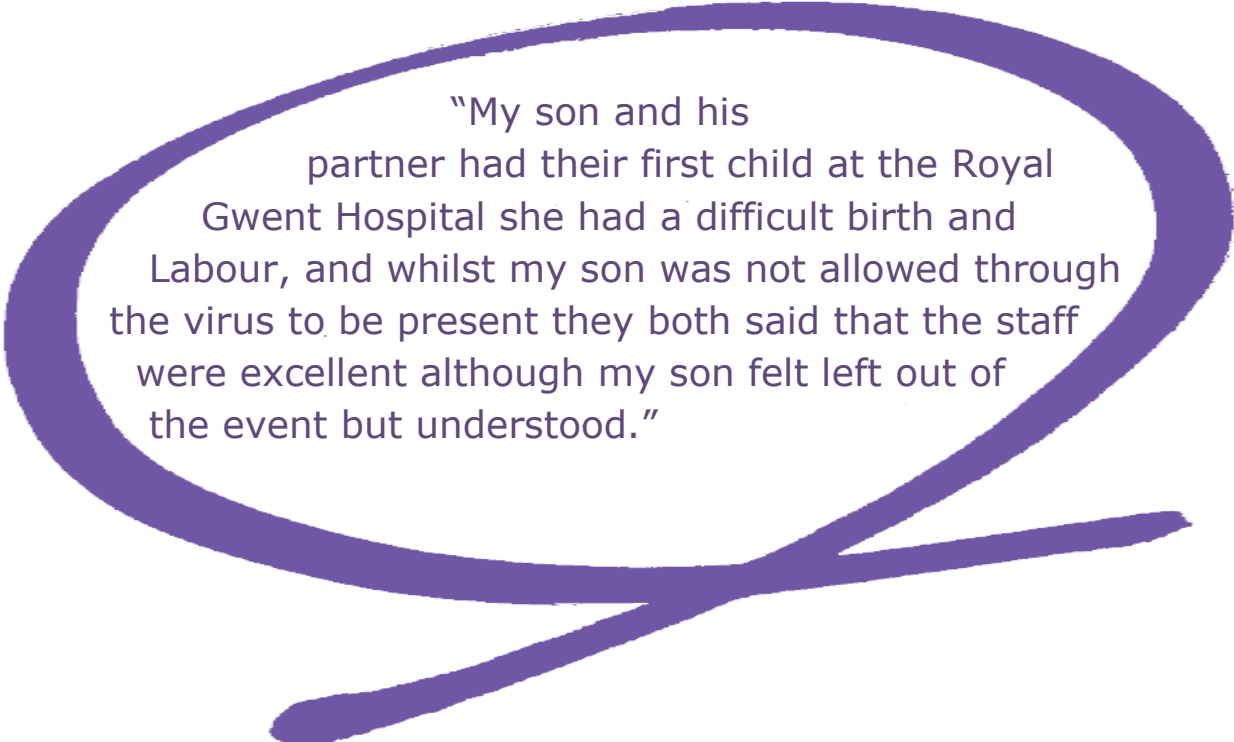


"Also I work in a hospital I have never seen it so empty, think birthing partners should be allowed in as long as there are no symptoms.

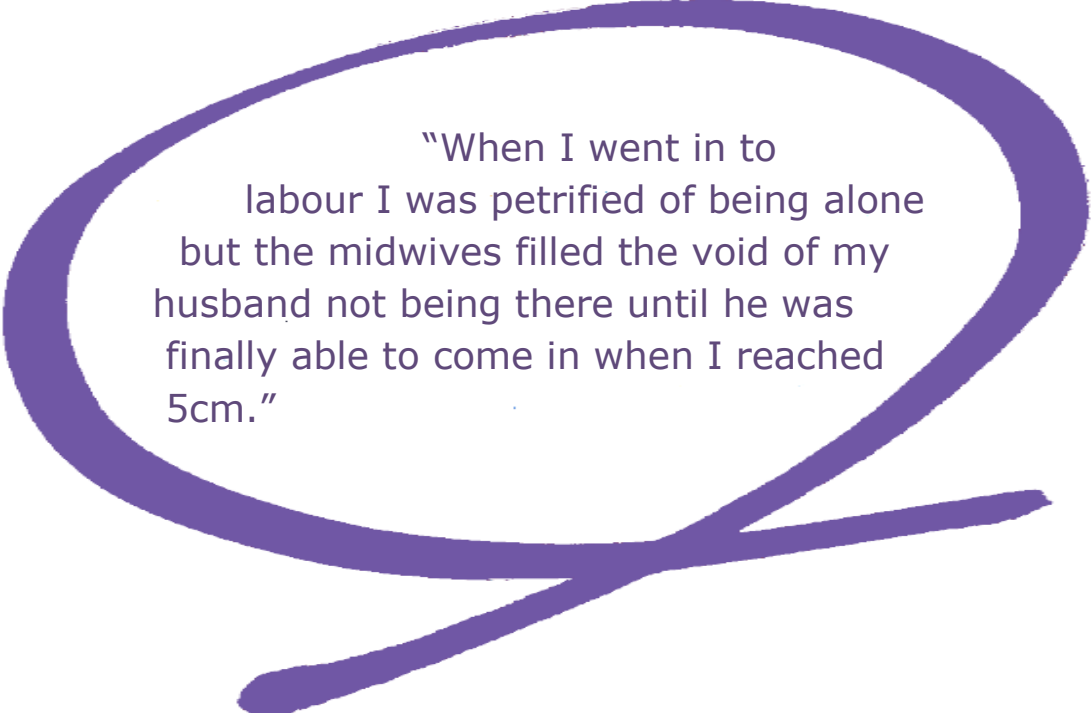
I get that everyone's scared but I'm just as scared to go into the hospital and possibly catching it just as much as the ward is scared of us patients - and if most pregnant women are like myself the only people I've been around in the past month is my husband who is also self-isolating and my midwife for appointments so I don't see why my husband can't be there"



We heard how staff had worked hard to support women in labour who were without their partners, and how it had affected their partners not being there:



"My son and his partner had their first child at the Royal Gwent Hospital she had a difficult birth and Labour, and whilst my son was not allowed through the virus to be present they both said that the staff were excellent although my son felt left out of the event but understood."



"When I went in to labour I was petrified of being alone but the midwives filled the void of my husband not being there until he was finally able to come in when I reached 5cm."

Other people's experiences were more mixed. Some people felt the impact on their care when staff were busy and under pressure.

"I can honestly say that my experience in hospital was awful. I was induced on Friday 17th this was my first .

I felt like the midwives had no time for you, every time you asked for something it was like it was a loads of trouble. When I started going into labour I was told to just go to bed, they only believed me when my waters had broken.

After my waters had gone my contractions came really fast and when I asked if someone could sit with me the midwife only sat with me for 5 minutes. I was scared and in pain and left alone: When they did finally examine me I was 4cm and then told I could call my partners who had a 1hour 10 minute drive but I went against midwife and had already called him and he was [wait]ing for me.

I had to walk to the labour ward. When I got to labour ward they were fantastic best care you could wish for I ended up having emergency C-section."



"I was induced, and then ended up having an emergency C-section. I felt as a first time mum I wasn't supported by your staff and wasn't listened to. I was very scared going into hospital by myself knowing my partner wasn't allowed in till in labour.

Some of your staff are amazing, some couldn't care that I needed help after having my c section. I have to say everyone on the labour ward and in theatre where amazing and I cannot fault them at all."

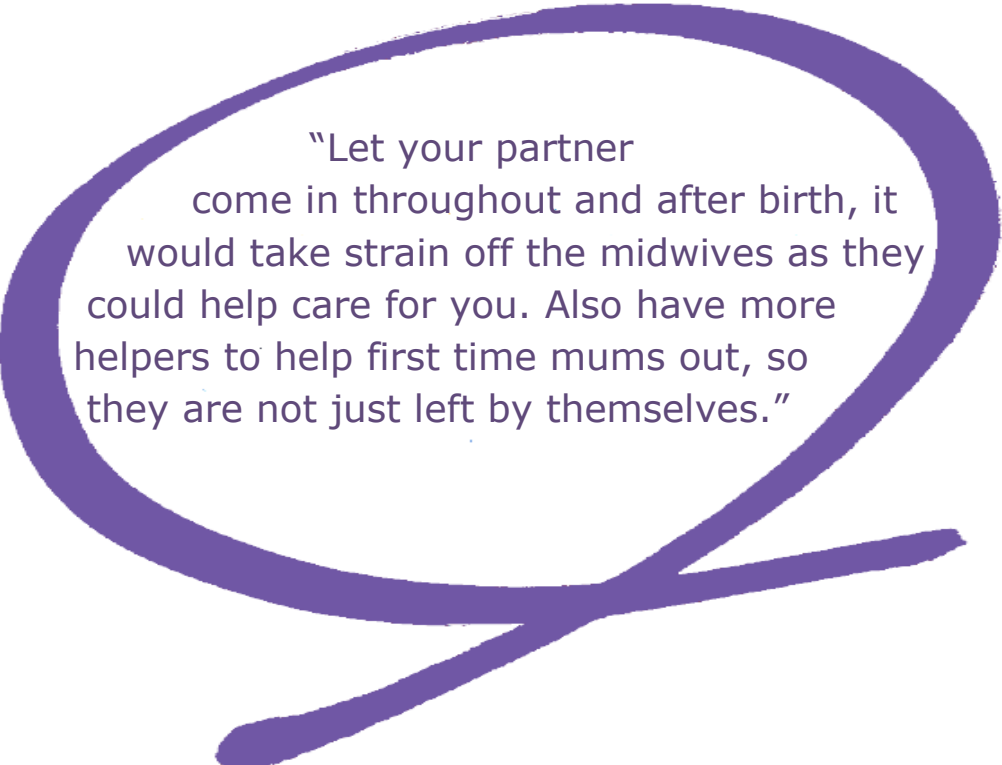
Care and support after birth

We continue to hear about women's anxieties because their birth partner is not able to stay with them after they give birth to provide them with help and support and to have the chance to bond with a new baby. Some women who had given birth by caesarian section found the arrangements particularly difficult.


"Let partners in to support and help you through out. Your staff didn't look after me where my partner could have supported me and I would have come out of hospital less traumatised.

I feel like as the midwife don't have time for you as a first time mum you need extra support but none of it was there. You could do with people to just sit and help new mothers and show them how to Breast feed and bottle-feed."

"It is also distressing knowing that he will not be able to stay with myself and our new-born after birth, or visit us should we need to stay in hospital for any reason."



“Let your partner come in throughout and after birth, it would take strain off the midwives as they could help care for you. Also have more helpers to help first time mums out, so they are not just left by themselves.”



“So with current restrictions on birth partners remaining in the hospital it’s made it harder on women.

For those recovering from c sections we need a little more help and as helpful as your staff think they are they certainly aren’t dad and I find it is affecting dads as well not feeling the same bond straight away after birth because they are having to leave within 2-3 hours after having surgery....”.



For some people who may have had difficult experiences in the past, not having their partner with them was very difficult. For others, their experience has had a big effect on how they feel about having hospital care in the future:

Partners are able to bond and help if they are at hand for as long as needed. Keep the birth partners in the ward but make sure they take food and drink with them to prevent leaving the ward or hospital and risking further chance of infection etc. To still have the same help from birth partners because it effects both parents equally as much.....

...for those who haven't had great birth experiences previously this is going to affect them even more if they feel isolated and like staff are trying to take over from what the dads could be doing if they just remain on the ward until visiting hours are over end of the day

"It was the care I have when being induced and after I gave birth that has affected me the most. I know this is a hard time for everyone but they need to understand that we have no support with us and when they don't have time to support you when you need them the most. I was glad to get home after five days in hospital. If I could have given birth at home I would have as this experience has really put me off going back into hospital in the future"

For some people, not having visitors after giving birth provided them with time to get used to things, and felt fully supported by staff:

"Not having visitors after the birth was brilliant. You bonded with your child better, and was able to breast feed and get a good latch in no time. It also took away any stress of not looking or feeling your best when faced with excited visitors."

"The aftercare on ward 18 was also second to none. I felt at ease the whole time and thoroughly enjoyed the company of the staff while I was kept in for 2 days.

If it wasn't for the friendly staff within the NHS I dread to think of what the alternative experience would have been"

We heard how lockdown was having a big effect on how well supported some new parents felt after going home with their baby. For some people, having their partner at home more meant they were able to support each other as a family and enjoy time with their new baby.

For others, not having the support of grandparents or other loved ones meant things were more difficult.

We heard that for some people, the support available to them after they came home met their needs:



For others, the aftercare they received from GPs and health visitors has felt delayed and disjointed. Some people felt they were missing important checks on how they and their baby were doing.

"My baby was 3 weeks when lockdown was announced so her 4-week visit from the HV was cancelled and the discharge appointment with the midwife was done over the phone. I obviously understand this and that her 6-week appointment was also not arranged. I have not been offered a 6-week post-natal check-up, even over the phone.

At her 8-week injections appointment I had to ask for my baby to be weighed and it was only at this point I had a red book given to me. At her 12-week injection appointment, I had to ask for her to be weighed again. I then had to put the weight and check the chart myself and show it to the HV as she didn't want to touch the book.

After injections, when your child is screaming, it's a horrible feeling to feel like you have to get out of the surgery quickly. Not once since 2 weeks has anyone asked how I am, how we're coping at home, this could be done by a phone chat surely. I am lucky I am a 2nd time Mam with a good support network, via video calls."



"I had my second child in mid-February. After birth I have been suffering from high blood pressure - never had a problem before. I was going to have my blood pressure checked in the surgery. The Friday before the lockdown, my appointment was cancelled and I saw no one for 6 weeks.

A Health Visitor has called us twice in the last 12 weeks - although we received one phone call from her on the first day of lockdown. No one has offered to weigh my daughter since she was 3 weeks old. I feel let down by the health service and as if we have been forgotten".

"The post-natal care and baby checks have been minimal following having my baby such as with health visitor appointments.

As a first time mum I think it is important to have the regular normal contact from midwives and health visitors following birth.

We were discharged without the hearing check and this was not done until my baby was 6 weeks old following some conflicting communication by letter and telephone.

The care when we have received it has been brilliant however."



"I have had no post-natal check-up at all provided by the GP. I had an emergency C-section 13 weeks ago and have not had a follow up with the GP once, they haven't even contacted me to find out how I am.

I also have high blood pressure for which I had different medication after the birth and have not been assessed/reviewed once since leaving hospital.

I simply phone the surgery to order more medication and it is recorded on a month by month basis. I had to chase for my son's 6-8 week check even while we were at the surgery getting his 8 week immunisations.

It seems to me, though yes, they have to be more sensible regarding contact with patients, the support and service given by GPs is the very bare minimum with no real concern for the welfare of their patients who have had major surgery - in my experience anyway.

Why was I not given a check-up post-surgery?
Give patients who have had major surgery the check ups they require"



AMBIWLANS

AMBIWLANS

AMBULANCE

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Care when things go wrong

Luckily, in most cases pregnancy and childbirth leads to a healthy mother and baby. When things do go wrong, the impact can be devastating and long lasting. For any family dealing with this during the pandemic, the risks of not having the right support at the right time were higher. For some people, while they understood the challenges facing the NHS during this time, their experience left them feeling let down:

"Due to the maternity services being cancelled and reserved for emergencies, when I suffered bleeding early on in my pregnancy I was refused for an early viability scan at Singleton Hospital. 6 days later I suffered a ruptured ectopic which resulted in a 6 hour ambulance wait.....

The scans for pregnant women should not have been cancelled or refused. I feel the risk of having me in hospital for 2 days, having open surgery without a blood transfusion afterwards carries far more risk than that of a 15 minute scan already being investigated by [] Putting Things Right team. I then had emergency surgery to remove my baby and right Fallopian tube. Although the outcome of the lost pregnancy would still have been the same, I would not have been subjected to the terror and pain of the rupture had I had the scan when it was requested by my GP.

I feel let down by this and the aftercare following the ordeal, of which I have had none. Once I was discharged from hospital with a leaflet on general miscarriage, I have not been contacted since or offered any sort of physical or mental health support."

"The delivery of baby was great then baby went to NICO and that is where things were not great. My husband was not allowed for ten days to meet his son and those ten days were extremely stressful as we were in HDU with a premature sick baby.

I was asked questions everyday and night about our baby's health and decisions had to be made by doctors asking me then me ringing husband. This in its self was far too much to take in and cope with. And should not [have] happened.

Kept being told because of covid dads weren't [allowed] in but most days I went home to my husband and there was a huge amount of staff coming and going.

We found our baby had fab care but as parents we had nearly no care in the most stressful area I've ever been"

"Under foetal medicine because I was high risk, bleeding the day before was dismissed.

Next day I was forced to attend a scan ALONE to find our babies heartbeat had stopped the day before (when I was bleeding) and no one cared to even check me."

"Phoned up.... as had bleeding, they didn't ask my name and just said if it gets heavy to go to A&E.

Bleeding got heavier and went to A&E in Withybush on the Saturday morning. They were brilliant. Saw me, reassured me and found information for me and a number to ring on the Monday for the early pregnancy unit/team. On the Monday I phoned, again they did not even ask my name.

They said they are not seeing anyone and I just have to wait for a scan at 12 weeks. The bleeding continued and then pain followed. I ended up booking a private scan in Swansea where they told me that I was having a miscarriage.

I understand that everyone is stretched but I felt so let down."

Communication, advice and information

Throughout the pandemic, in all areas of healthcare CHCs have heard most of all from people about the importance of good communication and easy access to clear, simple advice and information.

In maternity services, we heard how grateful people were when they felt communication was good:

“Special service. First class care. Glangwili hospital midwife makes everyone feel at home and safe.

Despite the situation, the staff were so positive. Community staff also communicate well and offer support when needed. Totally fab !! Thanks to everyone.”



We also heard that in the early stages of the pandemic, people sometimes struggled to find the advice and information they needed.

"I think the care received from midwives has been fantastic. However, the lack of support & information when antenatal classes were cancelled has been poor.

Many first time parents like myself have no basic information at hand & won't be able to have family to help.

Maybe just update the website with more information"

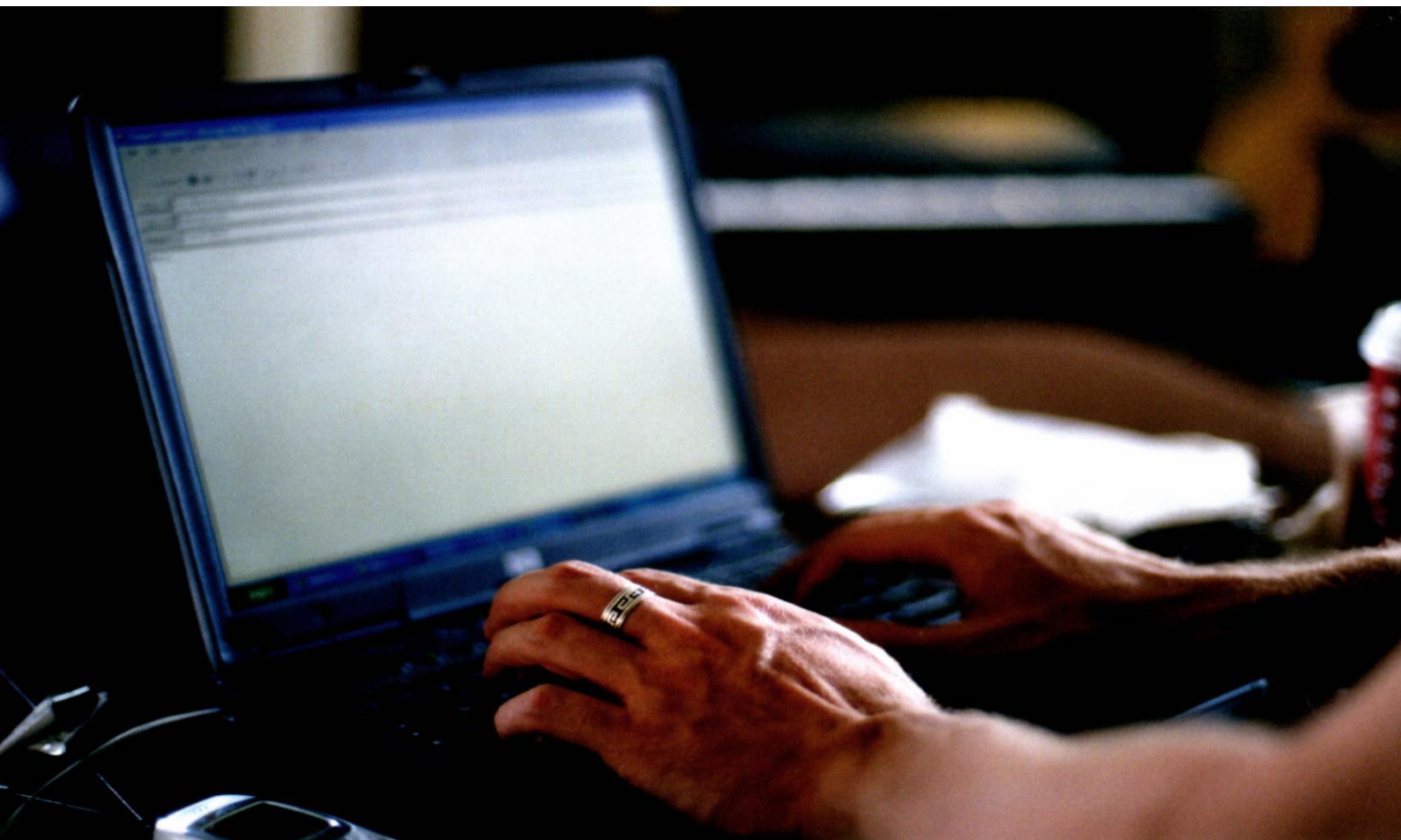
"Utilise TV advertisement locally or via news outlets to direct people on where to get the information they need."

"I am part of a Facebook group for all Wales antenatal care and although I cannot fault the care I'm receiving from Swansea Bay, it seems that other mums to be are not receiving the information they need and there's a lot of confusion over when they'll be seen.

I think there should be clear antenatal guidance from all health boards"

We heard how important it is to keep up regular contact and ongoing communication:

“Maintain regular contact via Skype or telephone or on person with social distancing measures followed and PPE. If this is a long term situation there needs to be a longer term plan for maternity care. I fear that things will get missed if contact is not maintained.”



We heard about the importance of taking time to explain things without rushing, making sure information is shared between healthcare staff, listening and treating people as individuals:

"I feel like since the virus there has been a massive change to my appointment experience saw my third midwife for my 37 week appointment, and as I came through the door she asked how have I been before I could say my second word she interrupted me to ask if I had any symptoms in a panic tone to which I replied no.

She asked if I was sure (of course I was sure I wouldn't have come otherwise) anyway I was then told that my next appointment will be on my due date where she would be giving me a sweep I wasn't asked if this was what I wanted.

My last scan appointment was rushed with not much explanation to me throughout. And to add insult to injury this is my first pregnancy so to potential have to spend hours without my partner in hospital surrounded by strangers while going through a pretty stressful situation has given me a number of panic attacks during my last trimester. Also my antenatal class was cancelled I have had to resort to YouTube for birth advice as midwife appointments are so short."

..... if things are explained properly and staff also communicate between themselves things would be easier to manage. Impact on us has been horrible and too stressful to the point of us struggling to cope."

"I was consultant led and felt at times my concerns were not listened to or taken seriously which led me to write an official letter of complaint and my care was transferred to the consultant midwife [] who listened and put me at ease."

"I found out I was pregnant, 5 weeks. Went to NHS Wales website and it said to go as soon as you find out. Phoned GP to be told that I need to phone maternity in the hospital. Phoned maternity and they said to phone back in 3 weeks.

Spoke to 3 different professionals and not one asked for my name.

Just ask for people's names!! I felt like a number and an inconvenience, not a human being."



Learning from what we heard

People share their experiences – good and bad – because they want it to make a difference. This may be thanking healthcare workers for their care and support, helping to make sure a poor experience is not repeated, and sharing ideas and suggestions for developing services further.

We have already seen how some of the things people struggled with as maternity services first responded to the coronavirus pandemic are being dealt with. This included things like involving loved ones in some appointments like scans over the summer period as the pandemic affected less people, and providing better information on-line.

We hope the feedback people have shared helps NHS staff and others recognise and value what has worked well for people so far.

The NHS in Wales also needs to drive further development and improvement in the areas highlighted in our report where things didn't go so well. This includes:

- making sure everyone gets the support and information they need easily when they need it
- actively keeping in touch and 'checking in' to provide the support women and their families need before and after giving birth, or when things may have gone wrong
- understanding and responding to the individual needs of women and their families, including those who may have had difficult experiences in the past.

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to affect our lives, NHS decision makers need to continue to think about and balance the impact of COVID-19 restrictions with the mental health and wellbeing of women and their families going through this life changing experience in such difficult circumstances.



Thanks

We thank everyone who took the time to tell us what matters to them about their health and care services and to share their ideas.

We thank the healthcare staff who made things so much easier for people and families giving birth during the pandemic.



"Very professional, caring and reassuring service
From antenatal to postnatal care – simply amazing!

Cannot thank the Royal Gwent enough on
supporting us through the birth of our daughter
through this pandemic"

We hope they influence health and care services to recognise and value what they do well – and take action where they need to as quickly as they can so that the things that cause very real difficulties for people using health and care services are made better.

Feedback

We'd love to hear what you think about this publication, and any suggestions about how we could have improved it, so we can use this to make our future work better.

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