

The Configuration of Midwifery-led Services

Briefing Document

Introduction

This document has been produced to provide information about midwifery-led maternity services within the Health Board, to advise of recent issues experienced by the service and to set out proposals for how these services could be delivered in the future. It is important that everyone who has an interest in maternity services has an opportunity to understand the proposals and to let us know their views.

Background

Aneurin Bevan University Health Board is responsible for all health services across the former county of Gwent, (including the local authority areas of Newport, Caerphilly, Monmouth, Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent) plus some of the population of south Powys. The midwifery-led model of care within the Health Board focusses on supporting the woman, birthing person, and their family through kind, compassionate care, using quality evidence to inform decision making. This is intended to ensure positive pregnancy and childbirth experiences that promote wellbeing and give babies the best start in life.

Maternity services have a duty of care to ensure sufficient provision of midwifery-led services to meet demands in all areas. Choice is essential to maternity care and all women should be able to make choices about their planned place of birth.

Operation of the Service

In accordance with best practice, the Health Board offers four different birthing options for expectant women as follows: -

- Home birth
- A free-standing midwifery-led birthing unit (without on-site medical cover – known as an FMU)
- An alongside midwifery-led unit (with on-site medical cover – known as an AMU)
- A full obstetric unit, led by consultants and delivered by medical and midwifery staff

Between November 2020 (when the new Grange University Hospital opened near Cwmbran) and May 2022, midwifery-led births were available across five Health Board sites as follows:

- Free-standing midwifery-led units (FMUs) at Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr (YYF) in Ystrad Mynach, Royal Gwent Hospital (RGH) in Newport, Nevill Hall Hospital (NHH) in Abergavenny and Ysbyty Aneurin Bevan (YAB) in Ebbw Vale
- Alongside midwifery-led unit at the Grange University Hospital (GUH) near Cwmbran (where the consultant-led obstetric unit is based)

Traditionally, these units have been staffed by midwives from our community team. In Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr, this has usually been through staff working formal shifts over a 24-hour basis, whilst the other units utilise midwives who are on call and attend when women present or require care.

Recent Issues Affecting the Service

There is considerable evidence to support the safety of births in a free-standing midwifery-led unit, but since November 2020 the number of women using these has been very low, with most choosing to give birth at the alongside midwifery-led unit at the Grange University Hospital (GUH). Activity figures (for midwifery-led births only) during that period are shown below:

	YYF	RGH	NHH	YAB	GUH Birth Centre
2019	279	85	47	1	N/A
2020	250	30	16	6	N/A
2021	118	24	20	19	840
2022	83	5	4	14	931

In addition to the increasing trend for women choosing to birth at GUH, the Health Board began to experience significant staffing challenges, with considerable difficulty in recruitment and retention of midwives, whilst this has been evident across all areas, it has been most noticeable within the community where recruitment has proved challenging. This in turn made it very difficult to ensure appropriate staffing levels for all our maternity units and concerns grew regarding the implications for service safety and standards.

In response to these challenges, the Health Board introduced a temporary service change to midwifery-led birthing services to ensure and maintain safe service provision. This was instigated in May 2022 and consisted of the following: -

- Temporary closure of the birthing units at Nevill Hall Hospital and Royal Gwent Hospital.
- Conversion of Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr to a birthing pod from 5.00pm and overnight (instead of a staffed unit 24/7).
- Maintenance of home births and births at the Ysbyty Aneurin Bevan birthing pod.
- No change to the alongside midwifery-led unit at the Grange University Hospital.

Planning for the Future Service

Given the ongoing midwifery staffing challenges, the Health Board commissioned an independent review of midwifery-led services, with the following aims: -

- To consider the current arrangements for provision of midwifery-led services
- To identify the most effective future staffing model for these services, taking into account the need for safe, sustainable and good quality care, whilst also maintaining the principle of choice for women and considering service access across the Health Board's geographical area.

The review identified four future service configuration options as follows:-

1. Retaining the existing temporary arrangements as the permanent model
2. Reverting to the arrangements in place before the temporary change
3. A 'hybrid' model whereby the units at Royal Gwent Hospital and Nevill Hall Hospital remained closed, but with extended facilities at Ysbyty Ystrad Fawr
4. A more radical long-term option consisting mainly of the existing units at the Grange University Hospital, supported by community services and home birth options

These options have been considered by the Health Board against the review aims. It has been concluded that providing the staffing and resource for options 2 and 3 on a consistent basis would be challenging, and potentially difficult to justify given the increasing trend for women choosing to give birth at the Grange University Hospital. In addition, option 4 was considered to be too restrictive in respect of future birthing options for women. As a result, it is now considered that the preferred option is to make permanent the current temporary arrangements as set out above, supported by the full consultant-led obstetric unit and alongside midwifery-led unit at the Grange University Hospital.

Seeking the Views of the Public

Although this option is considered to provide the best model for safe, sustainable and high-quality midwifery-led birthing options, before any final decision is made there is a need for the Health Board to engage with service users, staff, supporting services, voluntary groups and all other stakeholders. It is important that all those with an interest in the service have the opportunity to understand the proposals, to provide full feedback and to raise any queries or concerns for response. This will provide valuable information that will influence final decisions and service details. We will also use the information received to update the Equalities Impact Assessment.

What will happen after the engagement period?

Once the engagement period is complete, all responses and views will be collated and an engagement report prepared. This will be shared with the local region of Llais (the new body that has replaced Community Health Councils in Wales) and conclusions reached regarding whether a final decision can be made on future midwifery-led care provision, or whether further actions are required.

Subject to further discussions with Llais, we may wish to enter a period of formal consultation and should we do that we will once again invite your views.