



THE ROYAL
COLLEGE OF
MIDWIVES

POSITION
STATEMENT

DIGITAL
TECHNOLOGY IN
MATERNITY CARE



Digital technology in maternity care

RCM Position

The RCM supports the use of digital technology in maternity care to:

- Improve the experience of women using maternity services
- Enhance the safety and quality of maternity care
- Support midwifery practice and free up midwifery time to provide clinical care

To maximise the potential benefits of digital technology, all maternity services should:

- Use electronic records to contemporaneously record all aspects of care provided to women, from booking, through antenatal community care, intrapartum and postnatal care, in hospital and community settings.
- Provide appropriate electronic equipment to facilitate care in hospital and community settings, including for midwives and maternity support workers (MSWs) working in remote and rural settings.
- Enable women to access their records in a digital format, while ensuring that women who do not have access to digital technology are not disadvantaged.
- Provide access to personalised health information in a digital format.
- Ensure midwives and MSWs are familiar with relevant digital services and have the confidence to signpost women wishing to use digital resources for their own needs.
- Avoid unnecessary duplication, by using electronic systems to collect information once to use multiple times.
- Collect and use maternity data to support the ongoing improvement in the safety and quality of care.
- Appoint a Digital Midwife who can ensure that digital maternity issues are given due consideration throughout the organisation, from the maternity team to board level.

Background and context

Digital technology is not new to the NHS, but it is only in recent years, thanks to improvements in technology and increased knowledge of the benefits of digitisation, that maternity services have begun to prioritise digital transformation.

National policy

While there have been numerous calls for the NHS to better utilise technology to enhance care across all settings¹, progress has been far from smooth, with questions raised about the NHS's ability to implement major IT programmes and maximise the benefits for patients.²

Digital technology in maternity care

Across the UK each devolved nation has outlined their plans to address the digital agenda and transform NHS services through digital technology³⁴⁵⁶. These plans all address the key aspects of successful digital transformation including, people, culture, governance, and technology.

For maternity care, the catalyst for change has been provided by the reports of the national reviews of maternity services in England⁷ and Scotland⁸. The Maternity Transformation Programme (MTP) workstreams for 'harnessing of digital technology' and 'sharing of data and information' are driving significant change for maternity services across England, including the continued rollout of electronic maternity records and women's digital care records⁹.

The Digital Maturity Assessment was the first maternity specific review of the state of digital maturity within maternity services¹⁰. This demonstrated the breadth of disparity in the digital maturity of maternity services in England and outlined key areas for improvement including digital leadership, connectivity for community services and data driven improvements for maternity services.

Of particular significance is the development of the Maternity Record Standard (MRS), which will underpin improvements in the safety and quality of care through:

- Standardising the content of electronic maternity records, thereby enabling the accurate capture of data and the comparison of records for benchmarking purposes.
- Enabling maternity services to share data between NHS systems.
- Enabling better analysis of outcomes for women and babies, via the Maternity Services Data Set (MSDS), which the MRS supports.
- Supporting maternity services to continually review and improve service provision and delivery.

The importance of sharing information across healthcare systems has been highlighted by Northern Ireland in their eHealth and Care Strategy, where they have identified benefits of a single fully integrated electronic health and social care record across Northern Ireland¹¹.

The Topol review¹² identified that digital technology is an enabler that empowers patients to be more actively involved in their own care. This is supported by research which found that 90% of women want to access their maternity records digitally¹³. However, not all women have access to digital devices or other means of electronic communication and so it is important to ensure that these women are not disadvantaged by the introduction of electronic records and that all women can continue to access their maternity records, in whatever their preferred format, throughout their pregnancy.

Digital technology in maternity care

Supporting midwifery practice

Digital technology can support midwifery practice and safe care by:

- Reducing the administrative burden on staff, thereby enabling them to spend more time providing direct clinical care to women, people and babies who use maternity services. It has been estimated that the introduction of electronic records could increase midwifery time spent providing direct care from 30% to 70%, by reducing the time spent on administrative and non-clinical activities, such as writing referrals¹⁴.
- Enhancing communication between health professionals and supporting multidisciplinary working.
- Avoiding unnecessary duplication of paper records into summary systems by implementing 'end to end' electronic maternity records
- Enabling women to be more directly involved in their care, for example through the online completion of personalised care and support plans (another example of how utilising technology can free up midwives' time from administrative tasks).

With much of the country now having access to 4G networks and WIFI, digitisation can also support midwives and MSWs working in remote and rural settings, who have traditionally not enjoyed access to the same digital information as colleagues in urban environments (an issue highlighted in the NHS Long Term Plan). Where online networks are not available, systems should support offline working, so that the user can continue to access and document in the electronic record contemporaneously.

Leadership

The Topol review¹⁵ highlighted a lack of adequate digital leadership within the NHS, which has led to poorly designed digital transformation and a disconnect between appropriate digital solutions and clinical staff. Since this deficiency was highlighted by the review, there has been increased investment in digital leadership roles within the NHS and the creation of and recruitment to clinical information and nursing information officer positions.

Within maternity services, the equivalent position is that of the Digital Midwife, sometimes also known as IT Midwife or System Midwife. This role is integral to the safe and effective implementation of electronic records and, more generally, digital transformation in maternity services. The role of the Digital Midwife is highlighted within the RCM Career Framework¹⁶ as well as in a model job description, produced by NHS Digital¹⁷. It is important to stress that digital knowledge should not be regarded as the sole preserve of the digital specialist and senior midwives at all levels should have a good knowledge and understanding of the available technology to support their local services.

Digital technology in maternity care

Endnotes

1. Gov.uk (2016) Making IT work: Harnessing the power of health information technology to improve care in England. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/using-information-technology-to-improve-the-nhs>
2. National Audit Office (2019) Digital Transformation in the NHS. <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-use-of-digital-technology-in-the-nhs/>
3. NHS. The NHS long term plan. 2019. <https://www.longtermplan.nhs.uk/>
4. Robison SJ. CP. Scotland's Digital Health and Care Strategy: enabling, connecting and empowering. Community Health and Social Care Directorate: The Scottish Government. 2018.
5. Welsh Government A healthier Wales: our plan for health and social care
6. Department of Health, Northern Ireland Health and Wellbeing 2026 - Delivering Together
7. Cumberlege J. (2016) Better Births. Improving outcomes of maternity services in England. A Five Year Forward View for maternity care.
8. Best start (2017) <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2017/01/best-start-five-year-forward-plan-maternity-neonatal-care-scotland/documents/00513175-pdf/00513175-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00513175.pdf>
9. NHSE (2021) MTP – Harnessing digital technology. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mat-transformation/harnessing-digital-technology/>
10. NHSE (2018) Digital maturity Assessment Report. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/maternity-dma-report-digital-maturity-assessment-of-maternity-services-in-england-2018/>
11. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/interactive-ehealth-strategy.pdf>
12. Topol, E (2019) The Topol Review. Preparing the healthcare workforce to deliver the digital future. An independent report on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.
13. Cumberlege J. (2016) Better Births. Improving outcomes of maternity services in England. A Five Year Forward View for maternity care.
14. SQW (2019) Evaluation of the Early Adopter Maternity transformation final programme report.
15. Topol, E (2019) The Topol Review. Preparing the healthcare workforce to deliver the digital future. An independent report on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.
16. RCM (2019) Digital Midwife, Career Framework.
17. NHSE (2018) Digital maturity Assessment Report; Supporting Documents: Role of the Digital Midwife <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/role-of-digital-midwife.xlsx>



10-18 Union Street
London
SE1 1SZ

info@rcm.org.uk
Published: **March 2021**
www.rcm.org.uk