

# blueprint

**for better maternity care in Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland Assembly elections (5 May 2022)



Royal College  
of Midwives

# RCM blueprint for better maternity care in Northern Ireland

Getting maternity services right means a safer, more positive experience for women, and better outcomes for newborns. Here in Northern Ireland it means giving the tens of thousands of babies born every year the best start in life. That is something everyone involved in politics (and healthcare) wants to see.

*Karen Murray*

Director for Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland will head to the polls on 5 May (by chance, the International Day of the Midwife) to elect 90 MLAs. This is an opportunity to help shape the future of Northern Ireland, and where better to start than in supporting better maternity care? **That is why we are asking every candidate from every party contesting this election to adopt the recommendations set out in this RCM blueprint for better maternity care.**

## We want to see:

- Safer, better resourced maternity care
- More midwives, so we can provide better and more specialist care
- A renewed maternity strategy to get us back on track
- Healthcare staff supported as they help Northern Ireland recover from the pandemic



# Recovering from the pandemic

Fighting the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on Northern Ireland. It will take a long time for us to recover, and we are likely to be living with its effects for many years to come.

The pandemic has shone an intense and unforgiving light on the many longstanding problems in health and social care in Northern Ireland (issues caused or made worse by years of underfunding, an absence of workforce planning and the lack of system reform) despite many reviews and reports published over the last 15 years.

Maternity care has not been immune to these challenges, nor to the impact of the pandemic. Our services have remained open and midwives and maternity support workers (MSWs) have continued to support pregnant women throughout, often in very challenging circumstances.

Many of them are, quite simply, exhausted and some are even traumatised by what they have experienced. Alongside this, many staff are themselves still suffering the long-term effects of infection.

Services need to keep functioning, and we need to start the work of clearing backlogs, but the system and its people also need time to recover. We have no magic wand and there is no easy answer about how we balance these competing needs, but we need a clear, honest plan for how we tackle this huge challenge.

**The RCM is therefore calling on the Executive that is formed after the election to develop a recovery plan, including the need to provide ongoing health and wellbeing support for HSC staff. We call on all parties and candidates to commit to this.**



# Northern Ireland needs more midwives

The RCM has consistently raised concerns about the size of the midwifery workforce in Northern Ireland, and whether it is adequate to provide the high quality and effective services women deserve and expect.

Increasing demands such as the development of continuity of midwifery care and other midwife-led care models, the increasing focus on safety initiatives and the increase in both medical and social complexity all contribute to a service in desperate need of more trained staff.

We need to ensure we are training enough new midwives – and employing them too. It takes three years to train a midwife and for them to be available to join the workforce. While we can attract and recruit high-quality candidates to midwifery training programmes, we must ensure that they are well-supported and have a high-

quality educational experience so that we retain them once they qualify. Offering more career opportunities, educational development and flexible working patterns will be fundamental to securing a steady supply of midwives for the future.

We must see investment in workforce – in particular, funds must be earmarked to pay for the implementation of the findings of Phase 11 Delivering Care, the policy framework for nursing and midwifery workforce planning in Northern Ireland. That would make sure Northern Ireland has the right number of midwives to meet the needs of women and families.

**The RCM asks all parties and candidates to back midwives by committing publicly to invest in Northern Ireland's midwifery workforce, to bring it up to strength and ensure we train all the new midwives we need for the future too.**

**Offering more career opportunities, educational development and flexible working patterns will be fundamental to securing a steady supply of midwives for the future**



# Better, safer maternity services for Northern Ireland

Better maternity care is safer maternity care. While more midwives are fundamental to this, safety is more than just workforce.

Detailed reviews of maternity services across the UK in recent years have highlighted serious systemic failings. If we are to build better, safer maternity services, we must learn lessons, particularly around culture, workforce and multidisciplinary working. That takes hard work and resources – but making maternity services safer is surely one of the most important investments any government can make.

This work has already begun and, in many areas, is being spearheaded by the RCM. The Northern Ireland Maternity Quality Improvement Collaborative, an effective multi-professional group, has made a significant contribution to ensuring a regional approach to safety critical initiatives. However, this needs

resources to ensure the sustainability of the ongoing work of improving safety and the implementation of initiatives such as Saving Babies Lives and Each Baby Counts.

To that end, we want to see an allocation of money to maternity services ringfenced for the full implementation of safety initiatives. We seek a commitment to the development of a maternity network that works on the same lines as the existing neonatal network with similar levels of accountability. It should have a focus on sharing information, best practice, and initiatives to improve levels of safety (as recommended by the RQIA, Review of a Strategy for Maternity Care in Northern Ireland ).

**The Northern Ireland Assembly should commit to working with the RCM, maternity staff and others to drive up standards of safety in our maternity services. Nothing could be more important. We ask parties and candidates to commit to this.**



# A renewed Northern Ireland maternity strategy for the decade ahead

Increasing health and social complexity of women demands different things from maternity services, and those services need to be able to adapt. More and more women are rightly seeking greater control and choice over their care. The growth of births in midwife-led units and increasing requests for homebirths are examples of this.

We need to consider how best to respond to these changes and ensure that maternity services continue to deliver the kind of care women want, where they want it.

Maternity services have value beyond supporting women and families through pregnancy, labour, birth and the postnatal period. They are also well-placed to adopt a population health approach by putting public health, prevention and early intervention at the centre of everything they do. There are so many ways in which maternity services can help improve the health of the public and reduce inequalities, whether it is helping mothers quit smoking, supporting them to

breastfeed their babies, or to encourage other healthier lifestyle choices. We know that good support during pregnancy leads to healthier women and healthier babies.

This is why Northern Ireland needs a maternity strategy – an opportunity to look in detail at these issues and develop plans to deal with them. A new maternity strategy is the best way to ensure the development of services that are responsive and evidence-based, and provide safe, sustainable, quality care. Frustratingly, however, the last maternity strategy for Northern Ireland ended in 2018 and has still not been replaced.

Plans were in place to start work on a new strategy in early 2020 but were knocked off track by the pandemic. We are pleased that the current Minister for Health has confirmed that work on the new strategy will start soon and that it has broad cross-party support. We need to ensure that that momentum is not lost.

**A new maternity strategy is the best way to ensure the development of services that are responsive and evidence-based**

**All parties and candidates contesting the Assembly elections should give their public support for a new maternity strategy for Northern Ireland and commit to its development being made a priority by the incoming Assembly– and to ensure services receive the investment required to implement it.**



# Forging the future

There are many challenges facing maternity services in Northern Ireland.

It is our hope that, in the months and years to come, how these challenges are tackled and solved will be at the centre of our political debate here in Northern Ireland. To get to that point will require stability and normality to be the mainstay of our politics.

**The people of Northern Ireland want and deserve public services that are run effectively and appropriately and deliver what they need. The RCM stands ready to work with the Assembly and Executive that emerge from the May elections to do our part in making that happen.**





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**The Royal College of Midwives  
10–18 Union Street  
London  
SE1 1SZ**

**0300 303 0444  
[info@rcm.org.uk](mailto:info@rcm.org.uk)  
[www.rcm.org.uk](http://www.rcm.org.uk)**