

Maternity services

Maternity services are the primary source of support for parents in pregnancy through to birth. This care may be provided predominantly by midwives, but supported by GPs, health visitors, specialists and wider healthcare professionals and community support groups. Support during this period, not only increases safety for newborns and their mothers/gestational parents but can also help early identification of potential problems for higher risk pregnancies, as well as provide information and support for parents and carers for their physical and mental health and wellbeing.⁵²

Continuity of care in this period has been one example of evidence of how high-quality and properly resourced services can improve health outcomes for babies and new mothers/gestational parents: as explained by the NHS Long Term Plan,

“Women who receive continuity of carer are 16% less likely to lose their baby, 19% less likely to lose their baby before 24 weeks and 24% less likely to experience pre-term birth.”⁵³

However, the current pause to review these changes is key to ensuring these are taken forward effectively and with proper resourcing.⁵⁴ Tragically, some of the most compelling evidence for why high-quality maternity services are so effective comes from what happens when the system breaks down. For instance, as was evidenced in the Ockenden Report investigating system-failings at Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, which led to deaths and injuries of babies.⁵⁵

*“The health visitor was really interested in how everyone was. We really appreciated the support.”
Penelope’s dad Nick*

Health visiting

Health visiting is the backbone of early years services across the UK. Health visitors, central to the delivery of the Healthy Child Programme (HCP) are considered the ‘safety net’ around all families, as families don’t need referrals to be able to access support. The most visible aspect of the HCP and health visiting is the five mandated checks in England that all babies and parents and carers should receive from pregnancy through to the age of 2.5. These reviews provide important ‘touch-points’ with families to promote health and wellbeing for all family members and benchmark child development to identify children with developmental delay, previously undiagnosed childhood conditions, disabilities, or other vulnerabilities. Health visitors also work with parents and carers, supporting them with physical and mental health problems or social needs. This includes providing safeguarding and child protection support, and referrals to other services when needed.

Evidence also shows the importance of health visiting for supporting wider public health. For example, a Public Health England review of the 50% increase in health visitors between 2010 and 2015 found a potential link to improvements in outcomes across teenage pregnancy, smoking in pregnancy, low birthweight at term, infant mortality, excess weight at 4–5 years, hospital admissions for injuries under 5 years and coverage of MMR immunisation.⁵⁶

