

Ensure fathers/birth partners are involved in all assessments & care throughout the perinatal period

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 21 Mawrth 2022
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Reference: SR22/2236-1

Petition Number: P-06-1255

Petition title: Ensure fathers/birth partners are involved in all assessments & care throughout the perinatal period

Text of petition: The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting regulations have had a devastating impact on many fathers/partners who were not permitted at scans, assessments or sometimes even the baby's birth. Many fathers missed the birth altogether whilst being left outside in car parks for several hours and even days.

Fathers' experiences must be acknowledged and reviewed to inform future decision making and NHS guidance to ensure fathers/partners are treated fairly and not excluded in the future - even in a pandemic.

Whilst the negative impact on mothers has been highlighted, it is also important to recognise the effect on fathers/partners. Being excluded in this way has resulted in well-being and mental health issues, anxiety and concerns about the mother and the baby's health whilst being denied such precious and important experiences.



1. Background

During the pandemic, restrictions were put in place in relation to fathers/birthing partners attending maternity appointments and births.

In the response to the petition on 1 March 2022, the Minister for Health and Social Services notes that attendance restrictions were put in place in health care settings to ensure the safety and well-being of the birthing parent, their babies, the staff who supported them and others who needed access to maternity services at the time.

The current [hospital visiting guidance](#) was published by the Welsh Government in July 2021. Further Welsh Government guidance on [Alert Level 0](#) (February 2022) notes that the focus remains on ensuring there is a balance between protecting vulnerable individuals receiving treatment in hospitals and allowing visiting, which is important for the well-being of patients and friends and families.

Annex 2 of the [hospital visiting guidance](#) sets out a framework to assist NHS health boards to assess visitor access for partners, visitors and other supporters of pregnant women in Welsh maternity services during the pandemic.

The framework has been informed by guidance provided to NHS England from the Royal College of Midwives, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the subsequent published framework by NHS England (September 2020).

Annex 2 of the guidance states that health boards are required to tailor their policies to the local situation and in periods of high local COVID-19 transmission rates and/or variants of concern, health boards should revise guidance according to need.

It is suggested that health boards undertake a risk-assessed approach, following an assessment, making any necessary changes according to local transmission of the virus to either relax or reinstate previous levels of restrictions.

Annex 2 of the guidance also states:

Policies on permitting access to women's partners, visitors or other supporters should be regularly reviewed, be tailored to the local context and take account of:

- current national pandemic risk and government policy;

- NHS recovery phases;
- local trends in COVID-19 incidence and prevalence;
- physical space in the maternity service, including in waiting areas and clinic rooms;
- the number of women expected to attend an outpatient scan or clinic, and the use of waiting areas which are shared with other services;
- the number of women expected in an inpatient maternity unit (e.g. a postnatal ward), distance between bed spaces and cots as well as flow through ward; and
- staffing of the maternity clinic/unit.

Consideration should also be given to the needs of women who require additional support to access maternity services and where reasonable adjustments may be required.

A supplementary statement on hospital visiting during the pandemic was issued by the Welsh Government in June 2021 (last updated 10 January 2022). The Welsh Government acknowledges that variations can occur in community transmission across different parts of Wales. The hospital visiting guidance sets out the current baseline for visiting in Wales during the pandemic, however, the Welsh Government recognises that providers of health care to which the guidance applies may depart from the guidance in response to:

- rising levels of COVID-19 transmission in their localities and/or evidence of nosocomial transmission within a particular setting, or
- falling levels of transmission in their local area.

Further guidance is provided in the supplementary statement, but all decisions to depart from the guidance should be made by the health board, trust or hospice's executive team with their own infection prevention and control teams in collaboration with Public Health Wales.

2. Welsh Parliament action

During the pandemic, Members of the Senedd asked a number of written and oral questions relating to restrictions on fathers/birthing partners accompanying pregnant women to medical appointments and births.

On 14 September 2021, Heledd Fychan MS stated in Plenary:

I have received phone calls and e-mails that are very emotional from mothers talking about the impact of this on their own mental health, fathers saying that this impacts that important bond between themselves and their children, and in terms of paediatrics, children wanting both parents there, and children in tears because that can't happen. [Para 242]

In response to a question in Plenary on 19 May 2021, the First Minister explained:

The guidance in Wales encourages the system to be as welcoming as possible, but the reason for discretion is real. Maternity units across Wales vary enormously in terms of the size of the premises, the nature of the layout of buildings and so on, and, obviously, individuals come with different levels of risk themselves. Coronavirus has not gone away; people who are ill with it find themselves in hospital, and it has to be, in the end, a clinical decision made by the team of people looking after the woman and her partner as to how safe it is for other people to be involved directly in appointments. Now, the policy is that wherever it is safe to do so, that is what should happen, but I don't think we are in a position in the Senedd to make those individual clinical judgments in the different physical circumstances and individual circumstances that people face. [Para 148]

A debate was held during Plenary on 9 December 2020 on support for babies and new parents during COVID-19, which discussed the restrictions placed on fathers and birthing partners.

3. Welsh Government action

In correspondence to the Committee on 1 March 2022, the Minister for Health and Social Services recognises that the restrictions that were in place during the pandemic will have had an adverse impact on the amount of time some fathers and parents were able to spend with their babies in their earliest days.

It is acknowledged that from the start of a child's life, the relationship with both parents is crucial to their well-being and development. The Minister states that 'at

the heart of all our children and early years policies, is the support and promotion of the positive involvement of all parents in a child's upbringing'.

The Minister highlights that as Wales enters a new phase of the pandemic, Welsh Government officials are looking at the guidance issued to health boards to ensure visiting policies, including attendance at maternity services by fathers and partners, will be sustainable and appropriate and will look to reduce variation in policy across Wales. The Minister will be looking for this advice to balance the safety of people attending and working in healthcare settings with their well-being and access to support and care from family and friends.

In January 2022, the Minister announced £1.15million to launch a **Maternity and Neonatal Safety Support Programme**. As part of this Programme, the Welsh Government is funding a Service User Engagement Manager to look at how the Welsh Government can better engage with parents and families at both a national and local level. The Minister notes:

I would like to ensure the experiences of all parents and families, including fathers helps to shape future policy and the safety of our maternity, perinatal and neonatal services and they are improved through fair and inclusive treatment.

To support the initial discovery work, the Minister offers for the newly appointed official, when in post, to meet with the petitioner to discuss their experiences and discuss the changes they would like to see in the future, in terms of engagement and inclusion of fathers and partners.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.