



WALES AUDIT OFFICE  
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*Dea Darn*

## MATERNITY SERVICES IN WALES – AN UPDATE ON PROGRESS

As you may recall, I promised to provide the Public Accounts Committee (the Committee) with an update on maternity services in Wales, following the completion of local audit work at health boards by the Wales Audit Office. The attached annex provides an update of the progress that has been made by NHS Wales in addressing concerns identified by our earlier audit work, and by the Committee in the third Assembly. For the benefit of current Committee members, the following brief chronology may help:

In June 2009, the Wales Audit Office published a national report entitled *Maternity Services in Wales*. This report concluded that, whilst most women in Wales were generally satisfied with the services they received, practices in maternity services across Wales varied unacceptably and performance and financial information was generally not well- collected or used. The Committee took evidence from the Welsh Government in November 2009 and published its own *Interim Report on Maternity Services* in February 2010. In February 2011, the Committee took further evidence from the Welsh Government on the progress that was being made at a national and local level to improve maternity services. The Committee followed this evidence session up with additional written questions to the then Accounting Officer; who responded in writing in March 2011. The previous Committee did not have the opportunity to consider that response before the end of the third Assembly.

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Before the Committee returned to this topic in February 2011, I had already decided to carry out follow-up audit work on maternity services. During the spring and summer of 2011, the Wales Audit Office examined whether local health boards could demonstrate improvements in the planning and delivery of maternity services in response to the key issues identified in our and the Committee's earlier work. I should point out that our follow-up work constituted a relatively high-level check on the progress being made by health boards and consequently was more limited in scope and scale than the work which underpinned the 2009 audit report. Whilst the annex to this letter draws primarily on the findings from our follow-up work, I have sought to broaden out the scope of the briefing to the Committee by also drawing upon further documentary and interview evidence provided to us by the Welsh Government, as well as findings from the Welsh Risk Pool's annual assessments of maternity services.

My overall conclusion is that, since June 2009, there has been some progress in all areas covered by my and the Committee's previous recommendations. However, this progress needs to be accelerated, particularly to address the challenges that still exist in relation to reducing caesarean section rates, enhancing the capacity of neonatal services, and to implement a robust performance monitoring and management framework supported by efficient IT systems.

I reached this conclusion because:

- there is now a clearer strategic framework for maternity services and better information on which to plan services, although it is not yet clear to what extent these are driving service improvements;
- although health boards report that they are able to cope with demand, some are still not meeting recommended staffing levels, and most could not provide the evidence that staff have had the necessary mandated training;
- despite previous reports highlighting problems, neonatal services in Wales are still failing to meet relevant standards, and as yet there are no clear plans to improve this service; and
- whilst key aspects of service provision, such as antenatal services, have improved, caesarean section rates remain high.

The attached annex provides a fuller briefing on our findings. Whilst our work has pointed to some progress and improvements in maternity services, it has also shown that significant challenges still exist. The Committee may wish to consider whether it should take further evidence from the Welsh Government and Health Board representatives to obtain assurances that they are taking the necessary actions to improve maternity services further. It may be helpful for the Committee to consider what further action it might wish to take in dialogue with the Health and Social Services Committee and the Children and Young People's Committee. The latter committee is currently examining the progress the Welsh Government has made in implementing the

recommendations of the previous Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee *Inquiry into Neonatal Care in Wales*. For this reason, I have also copied this letter to the chairs of the Health and Social Services Committee and the Children and Young People's Committee.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Huw', followed by a larger, more stylized signature.

**HUW VAUGHAN THOMAS**  
**AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES**

***Enclosures:***

*Annex: Briefing paper on the progress made in improving maternity services in Wales*