



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

*From Maria Caulfield MP  
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Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP

Chair, Health and Social Care Committee

Professor Dame Jane Dacre

Chair, Expert Panel

6 May 2022

Dear Jeremy and Jane,

Thank you for your letter on 2 March 2022, regarding the newly established Maternity Disparities Taskforce and maternity service staffing.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to you both for your work on the Health and Social Care Committee's report and the Independent Expert Panel's report into maternity services. These reports go towards improving the care that mothers and babies receive.

As you are aware, I announced the plans to establish a Maternity Disparities Taskforce on 23 February 2022 to tackle disparities for mothers and babies and reduce maternal and neonatal deaths by improving access to effective pre-conception and maternity care for women from ethnic minorities and those living in the most deprived areas. We know that improving women's health in the run-up to pregnancy and improving the support they receive are vital to improving health outcomes for mothers and their babies.

I recognise the importance of engaging with a wide range of stakeholders to be able to tackle disparities. Therefore, the Taskforce's membership is wide reaching, bringing together experts from across the health system, government departments and the voluntary sector to tackle disparities in maternal and neonatal outcomes. The first Taskforce meeting took place on 8 March 2022 and included representation from several government departments, NHS England and Improvement, various Royal Colleges, the Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries across the UK, the National Child Mortality Database, and other key stakeholders.

The Taskforce will look to build on already existing systems to improve pre-conception health and early access to maternity services. The Taskforce will examine learning from existing interventions such as those in the NHS Long Term Plan, Equity & Equality Guidance for Local Maternity Systems, Family Nurse Partnership, and the NHS Core20PLUS5 approach to reduce health disparities.

Although the Maternity Disparities Taskforce will not have a specific timetable for reporting or making recommendations, it will seek to drive ambitious reductions in disparities by monitoring data, research and delivery of existing interventions, supporting the spread of 'what works well', identifying new challenges, and influencing system partners to continuously improve and holding them to account for agreed actions.

In setting up this Taskforce, I envisaged it to be ambitious and a place to collectively strive to deliver real change. To that end, the Taskforce meetings will be held every two months for 90 minutes. This will keep the important issue of maternal disparities at the forefront of our minds and ensure we are constantly looking to progress. The meetings will be a platform to analyse key priorities, delivery of actions, focus on specific themes, and look at emerging evidence of systemic issues and new approaches to address them.

We are hoping to hold the second Taskforce meeting on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2022, where the Terms of Reference will be discussed and formalised with members. Following this meeting and agreement with members, we plan to publish the Terms of Reference for the Taskforce.

The minutes of the Maternity Disparities Taskforce will not be published publicly. However, I hope the above information has given you an appropriate overview of the aims and purpose of the Taskforce.

Regarding your concern about staffing in maternity services, I can assure you that we are absolutely committed to solving the staffing gap in NHS maternity services, through a range of recruitment and retention initiatives.

As you mention in your letter, Health Education England undertook a survey based on the Birthrate Plus midwifery workforce planning tool to assess the gap between current midwives in post, current funded posts, and the recommended funded posts. Following this, as you note, NHS England and Improvement invested £95 million to support the recruitment of 1,200 more midwives and 100 obstetricians and to support multi-disciplinary team training.

Health Education England also lead the Return to Practice Programme for midwifery, to encourage the reemployment of staff to the NHS and so far 75 midwives have completed the Programme. Health Education England is supporting an enhanced offer for returning midwives accessing the Programme across 2022.

The Government has provided almost £450,000 to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) to develop a new workforce planning tool

to improve how maternity units calculate their medical staffing requirements, to better support families and babies. The tool will be freely available to NHS Trusts across the country in the next year. The tool will provide maternity staff with a new methodology that calculates the numbers, skill sets and grades of medical staff required within individual maternity units based on local needs. It will help Trusts tackle inequalities by taking into account local factors such as birth rates, age of population, the socio-economic status of the area, and geographical factors. The tool will calculate the number of obstetricians at all grades required locally and nationally to provide a safe, personalised maternity service within the context of the wider workforce. It will also help identify innovative ways of working to better utilise the current workforce; and help gain a better understanding of the factors which promote safety and positive culture within maternity teams and how these can be rolled out nationally.

In addition, NHS England and NHS Improvement are offering funding and support to NHS Trusts to recruit an additional 300-500 overseas midwives over the next 12 months. This financial year, £4.5 million of upfront infrastructure funding was allocated regionally to Trusts and collaborations to spend on infrastructure costs to kick start their maternity international recruitment.

Further support is being given to student midwives, to continue to grow staffing numbers. Health Education England has been working with stakeholders towards a targeted increase of 3,650 midwifery student training places by the end of 2022/23, with training leading to professional registration.

As part of the biggest nursing, midwifery and Allied Health Professional recruitment drive in decades, since September 2020 Health Education England has made available a new, non-repayable training grant of at least £5,000 per academic year for eligible students, and further funding of up to £3,000 per academic year for eligible students, for example to cover childcare costs or for specialisms struggling to recruit.

I hope this response is useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Maria'.

**MARIA CAULFIELD MP**  
**PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE FOR PRIMARY CARE AND**  
**PATIENT SAFETY**