AIMS For a better birth...

A fond farewell to, and from, Julia Cumberlege and Cyril Chantler, champions for changing childbirth for the better

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By Jo Dagustun, AIMS volunteer and Maternity Transformation Programme (England) Stakeholder Council representative

It was a truly poignant moment at our Council meeting in January as Julia Cumberlege announced that she and Cyril (chair and vice chair of the Stakeholder Council respectively) would be relinquishing their maternity roles at the end of March 2023. Seven years on from the publication of Better Births, they have stayed on to oversee the implementation of the report's recommendations, but they have surely now done their time, and on behalf of AIMS I would like to thank them for their commitment to this task. What we have now is Better Births firmly established as a key part of England's maternity transformation strategy, and it is time for others to step up to provide leadership for this important work.

What I have found remarkable in the domain of UK maternity service improvement work is how so many people devote decades of their life to this cause, well beyond the normal retirement age. Julia Cumberlege is perhaps a prime example of this, working in and around the edges of UK government for decades, to offer leadership and support for the implementation of a maternity policy that is fit for purpose. Many will also know Julia's excellent work to investigate the mesh scandal.

Progress on maternity reform is often hard won, with progress often difficult to detect as many small initiatives accumulate into meaningful change; we also work as much to maintain hard won progress as to further it. A long view here is vital, to ensure that we learn from the work over previous decades rather than forever reinventing the wheel. In her service, Julia - with Cyril supporting her over the last decade - has done more on this issue than most. Her extended period of leadership and service has been exemplary. She is persistent, encouraging, supportive and inclusive, working to centre the service user always. In maintaining a positive outlook, she inspires the best in others. I have been fortunate to come to know Julia through my volunteering for AIMS, and

have very much appreciated her ongoing work to support the implementation of Better Births (2016). Seven years on, there is much that has been achieved but much still to be done. In many areas, it could perhaps best be said that we are nearing the starting line for launching the transformation demanded in that report. But we also have new strength to draw on, in the form of the growing, dynamic and diversifying maternity service improvement community. As an AIMS volunteer, I know that my work will continue to be inspired by Julia and Cyril's leadership, and I thank them for their incredible service. Here is their statement:

A message to the women of England and their families from Baroness Cumberlege

Today, Sir Cyril Chantler and I are announcing that we are stepping down from our positions on NHS England's Maternity Transformation Board and the Maternity Stakeholder Council at the end of March 2023. It has been an absolute honour to be involved in these initiatives for the past seven years and to have led the National Maternity Review before that. We have chosen this moment because we both have growing commitments elsewhere that require more of our time.

We looked back at Better Births, the report of our Review, which we published in 2016. The following words are from the Letter to the Women of England and their Families that formed the foreword to Better Births:

> "The birth of a child should be a wonderful, life-changing time for a mother and her whole family.
>
> It is a time of new beginnings, of fresh hopes and new dreams, of change and opportunity. It is a time when the experiences we have can shape our lives and those of our babies and families forever.
>
> These moments are so precious, and so important. It is the privilege of the NHS and healthcare professionals to care for women, babies and their families at these formative times."

Our message to the women of England, today, seven years later, is the same. Maternity care is all about you, your baby and your family. It needs to be shaped around you. It needs to be a partnership between you and the team that cares for you. It must be safe and it needs to be based on your informed choices. Good maternity care is not done to you, it is done for you and with you. With you and your baby at its centre. It needs to be personalised care.

Good maternity care will always be at the heart of a good health service. And Better Births was all about good maternity care. The past seven years has been a privilege for the two of us; to meet and work with so many wonderful, talented and passionate people both at national level and in hospitals and communities across England. We thank them all.

Maternity care has been on a journey of improvement. The goal is to make services as safe and as personalised as possible. The journey is not over; much has been achieved but more remains to be done.

We may be stepping back but we will be watching the next stages of the journey with the keenest of interest and we look forward to being among the first to recognise the progress that is to come. We are confident that NHS England's work will be continuing through the single delivery plan and that Better Births will continue to be their guiding vision.

Finally, to you – the women of England and your families – we say this: maternity services and the teams that provide them are there for you, to make your maternity journey the best it can be for you and your baby. It is your body, your child. Never forget that you are at the centre of maternity care. We hope that, supported by wonderful maternity teams, your maternity experience is among the most special of moments in your life.

Baroness Julia Cumberlege

Sir Cyril Chantler

January 31, 2023