



Campaign update: Coronavirus and the maternity services

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by the AIMS Campaigns Team

Throughout the pandemic, AIMS has been campaigning for the needs of maternity service users to be recognised and for NHS Trusts/Boards to ensure that any restrictions they impose are a proportionate response to the situation. You can find details of all our campaigning activities on the [Coronavirus](#) page on the campaigns section of our website¹.

We have continued to update our '[Coronavirus and your maternity care](#)' Birth Information page to reflect changes in national guidance², and also our [template letters](#) for people to send to their Trust/Board to ask for their support needs to be met³. After hearing from our Helpline Volunteers of cases of parents being separated from their babies after birth, we added further information and a [template letter](#) specifically for parents of babies being cared for in a neonatal unit⁴.

We have also regularly posted content on our social media platforms to maintain awareness of the issues.

In October 2020, AIMS was instrumental in bringing together the But Not Maternity Alliance. This is a group of campaigning organisations concerned about the impact that maternity service restrictions are having on the safety and wellbeing of pregnant women and people, their partners and other supporters. The group takes its name from the #ButNotMaternity campaign started by doulas from The Birthbliss Academy in September 2020. It meets regularly to coordinate campaigning activities.

We were pleased to see updated guidelines published in all four nations of the UK towards the end of 2020 which, to varying degrees, encouraged Trusts and Boards to accommodate the support needs of maternity services users. (Details of the current guidance are available on our '[Coronavirus and your maternity care](#)' Birth Information page.⁵) In particular, we welcomed the guidance in December from NHS England: [Coronavirus » Supporting pregnant women using maternity services during the coronavirus pandemic: Actions for NHS providers](#)⁶.

This asked all NHS Trusts 'to urgently complete any further action needed so that partners can accompany women to all appointments and throughout birth' by undertaking risk assessments, making changes to their use of space and infection control measures, and using testing, including rapid testing.

Unfortunately, the publication of this guidance coincided with the arrival of the second wave of the pandemic, and this is likely to have delayed its implementation. Though there were signs that the

challenges of lifting restrictions are being addressed by many Trusts and Boards, there continued to be huge variation across the UK, as this [press release](#) from the But Not Maternity Alliance explains⁷. As a result of our press release, [the story was featured prominently in The Guardian over Easter](#)⁸.

It seemed extraordinary that at a time when governments had set out plans to lift restrictions in almost all areas of life, maternity care should be the exception. The Alliance therefore wrote to Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, urging him to set out a roadmap for easing restrictions on partners and supporters in maternity services. Sadly, there has been no announcement on this so far.

At the same time, the But Not Maternity Alliance, together with National Maternity Voices, organised a webinar for MVP/MSLC user representatives to raise awareness of the national picture on maternity service restrictions, share best practice at local level and identify what needs to happen at the national level to enable the lifting of restrictions. You can read the report of the meeting [here](#)⁹. Following this, the Alliance wrote to NHS England to highlight the key messages from the meeting:

- The need for a unified policy across England
- The need for more clarity around the 2m social distancing requirement being an aspiration but not a necessity
- The need for home testing of partners to be supported
- The need to publish evidence about the risk to staff and other service users of bringing back partners/visitors into different areas of maternity services, and how much testing and vaccination reduces these risks

We were very pleased when in April 2021, NHS England updated their guidance to urge Trusts to use 'any available testing capacity (including the national rollout of lateral flow testing) to test women and their support people' and to 'treat support people who test negative as part of the team supporting the woman.' Data collated by the But Not Maternity Alliance shows that over 90% of Trusts in England were admitting partners to 12- and 20-week scans by the end of April, and almost three-quarters were admitting them to later scans and all antenatal appointments. Many Trusts had also updated their postnatal visiting hours, although there continued to be a great deal of variation in the amount of time that partners/supporters were allowed to be present during inductions and on the postnatal ward.

At the time of writing, the Alliance plans to continue lobbying for all hospitals in all four nations of the UK to make every effort to enable all pregnant women and people to have the support they need throughout their maternity journey. Meanwhile, we are considering what further campaigning we can do to encourage Trusts/Boards to 'Build Back Better' in terms of access for partners/supporters and to maintain the improvements they have made if we experience a third wave of the pandemic.

We were delighted – and flattered – to learn that the But Not Maternity Alliance was the first runner-up in the Best Coalition category of the Sheila McKechnie Foundation's National Campaigner Awards 2021. This award 'recognises campaigns led by multiple partners in ways which are creative, respectful and genuinely collaborative.' AIMS is proud to have played a leading role in this group, which shows what can

be achieved when campaigning organisations work together. We hope this will be the first of many such collaborations.

[1] AIMS, 'Coronavirus and the maternity services': www.aims.org.uk/campaigning/item/coronavirus

[2] AIMS, 'Coronavirus and your maternity care': www.aims.org.uk/information/item/coronavirus

[3] AIMS, 'Template letters to request support during the coronavirus pandemic':

www.aims.org.uk/information/item/aims-template-letters

[4] AIMS, 'When your Trust is refusing/limiting access to your baby in Neonatal Care':

www.aims.org.uk/information/item/aims-template-letters#post-heading-4

[5] AIMS, 'Coronavirus and your maternity care': www.aims.org.uk/information/item/coronavirus

[6] NHS England, 'Supporting pregnant women using maternity services during the coronavirus pandemic: Actions for NHS providers': www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/publication/supporting-pregnant-women-using-maternity-services-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic-actions-for-nhs-providers

[7] But Not Maternity Alliance, 'We have roadmap for the nation But Not For Maternity':

www.aims.org.uk/assets/media/647/press-release-but-not-maternity-march-2021.pdf

[8] The Guardian, 'Plea to ease Covid maternity rules as women continue to get bad news alone':

www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/apr/04/plea-to-ease-covid-maternity-rules-as-women-continue-to-get-bad-news-alone

[9] But Not Maternity webinar on easing visitor restrictions for Maternity Voices Partnership members,

22 March 2021: www.aims.org.uk/assets/media/643/but-not-maternity-and-national-maternity-voices-webinar-on-easing-visitor-restrictions.pdf