

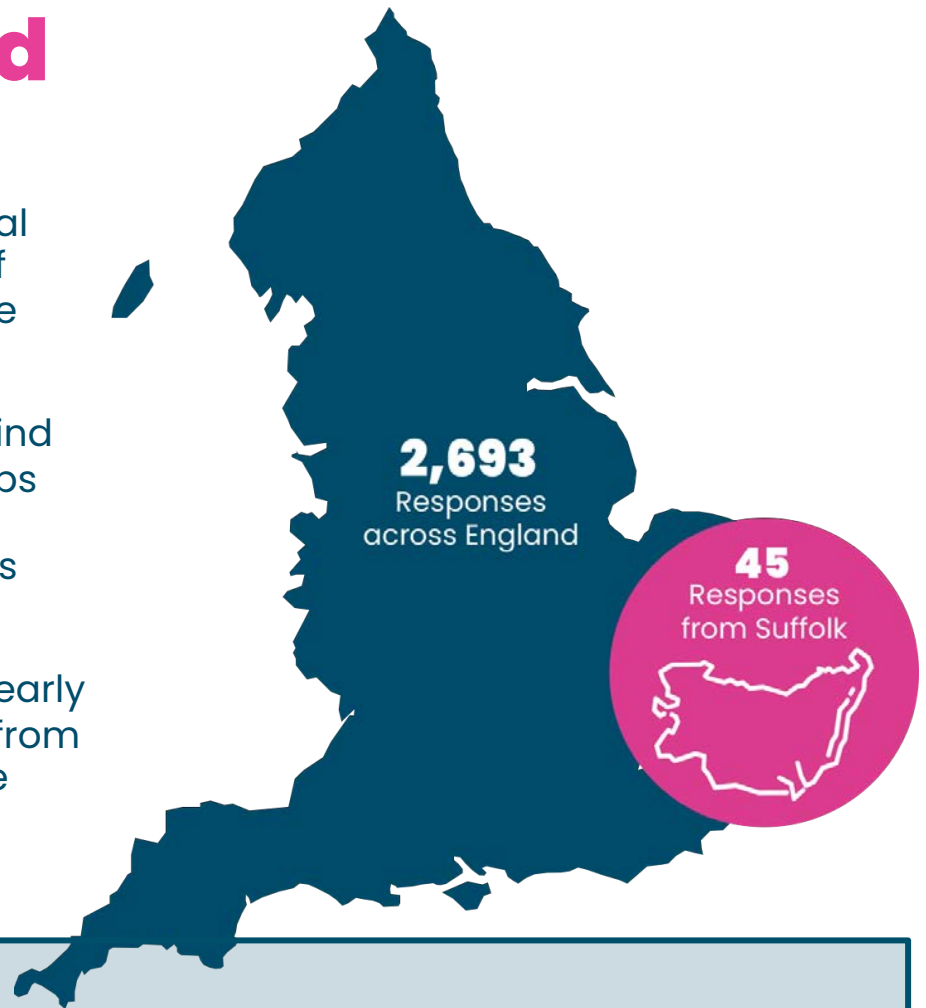
Maternal mental health

Experiences in Suffolk (Published March 2023)

A bit of background

About this report

- Healthwatch England launched a national survey to explore people's experiences of support for maternal mental health in the last two years.
- The survey included a particular aim to find out how well six-week postnatal check ups have worked for new parents. They were established by the NHS following previous work by the Healthwatch network.
- In total, Healthwatch England received nearly 2,700 responses and 45 responses were from parents in Suffolk. This report is about the responses to the survey from Suffolk residents.



Click to view the national report from Healthwatch England.

Who took part?

Demographics

Forty-five people took part in the survey from Suffolk.

- All respondents had their baby since April 2020.
- **71% (32)** said it was their first time giving birth.
- **96% (43)** of respondents were aged between 25 and 49 and **4% (2)** were aged 18 to 24.
- **89% (40)** of respondents identified as heterosexual/straight. Followed by **4%** asexual, **4%** bisexual, and **2%** were lesbian/gay women.
- **89% (40)** of respondents were White–British/English/Northern Irish/Scottish/Welsh. Respondents also identified as 'Chinese' (**2%**), 'Indian' (**2%**), 'African' (**2%**), 'Caribbean' (**2%**), and 'multiple ethnic groups: Black Caribbean and White' (**2%**).

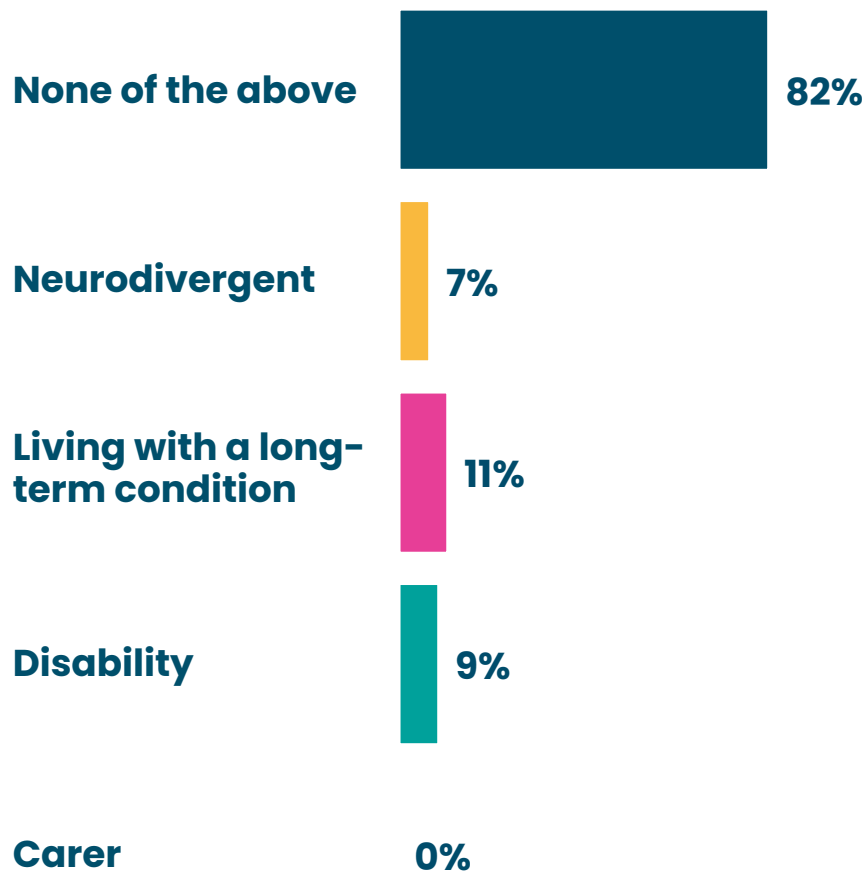


71%
of responses
from Suffolk
came from
first-time
parents.

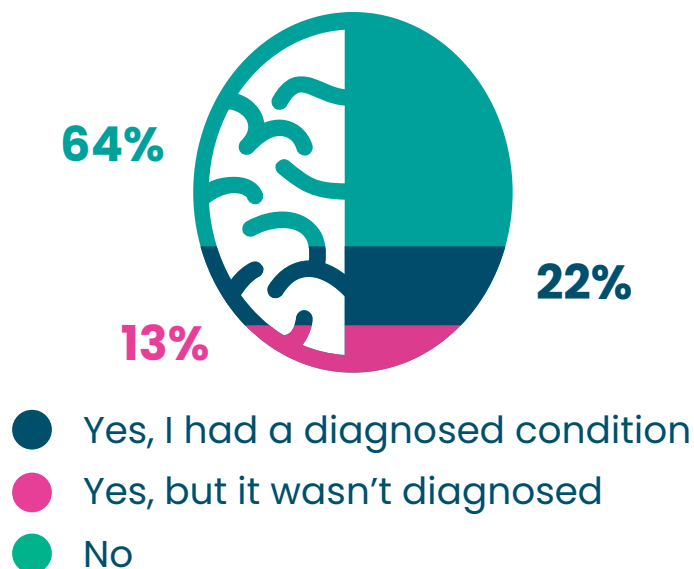


Click to view the national report from Healthwatch England.

The survey asked people about various factors that may influence their responses to the survey. This included things like having previous mental health concerns, and if they were caring for someone else. More detail is included in the graphs below.



Did you have a pre-existing mental health condition?



Almost 1 in 3 (16) respondents had a pre-existing mental health condition.



“The whole experience left me with PND and difficulties bonding with my baby, that damage feels irreparable now. I also mentioned this to my health visitor in the early weeks after baby was born, it felt brave to ask for help but nothing was done and I lost faith in the system.”





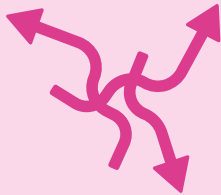
Our results

Local survey findings

Support during pregnancy

People did not always feel that their mental health had been supported during their pregnancy. Some did not know how to find support if they needed it, whilst others felt staff involved with their care were not aware of their mental health support needs.

Of those who had a mental health difficulty (10 respondents)...



Three

did not know how to get support for their mental health if they needed it.



Half (5)

Felt healthcare professionals involved in their care were unaware of their mental health needs.



Half (5)

Were not informed about the risks of taking, or stopping, medication for their mental health during pregnancy.

Ten respondents had a pre-existing mental health condition (diagnosed or undiagnosed) during their pregnancy. This is how they responded to a series of statements about support for their mental health from services and staff.

Support allowed me to make informed choices about managing my mental health during pregnancy.



I was informed about the risks of taking medication for my mental health.



I was informed about the risks of stopping medication for my mental health.



Healthcare professionals (e.g., midwifery teams, health visitors & GPs) were aware of my mental health needs



I knew how to access mental health support if I needed it



● **Yes, I had a diagnosed condition**

● **Yes, but it wasn't diagnosed**

A photograph showing a pregnant woman in a hospital gown, with her hands clasped, being held by a healthcare professional in a hospital setting. The image is partially obscured by a large green curved shape on the left side of the page.

Five

...respondents with a mental health difficulty felt support offered to them did not allow them to make informed choices about managing their mental health during pregnancy.

Experience of mental health

- **Almost 2 in 5 (38%/17)** respondents experienced mental health difficulties for the first time during their pregnancy.
- **Almost 1 in 4 (24%/ 11)** respondents experienced difficulties in addition to current mental health problems.
- **25% (4)** of respondents with a diagnosed mental health condition said they experienced an episode of a mental health problem they had previously recovered from.
- **69% (11)** of respondents with a prior mental health condition said they experienced a mental health problem in addition to their current problem.



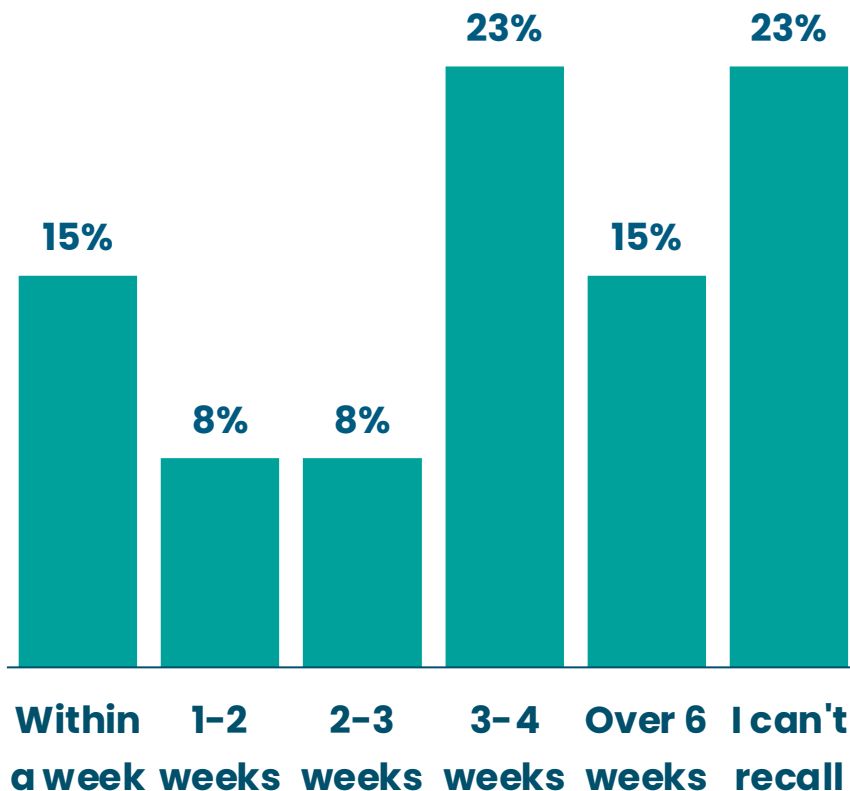


***“Partners should have been allowed
at every stage. Being alone
throughout maternity appointments,
and especially in early labour and
postnatal is something I will never
get over.”***



Waiting for support

Thirteen people told us about how long they had waited for mental health support. Their responses are shown in the graph below.



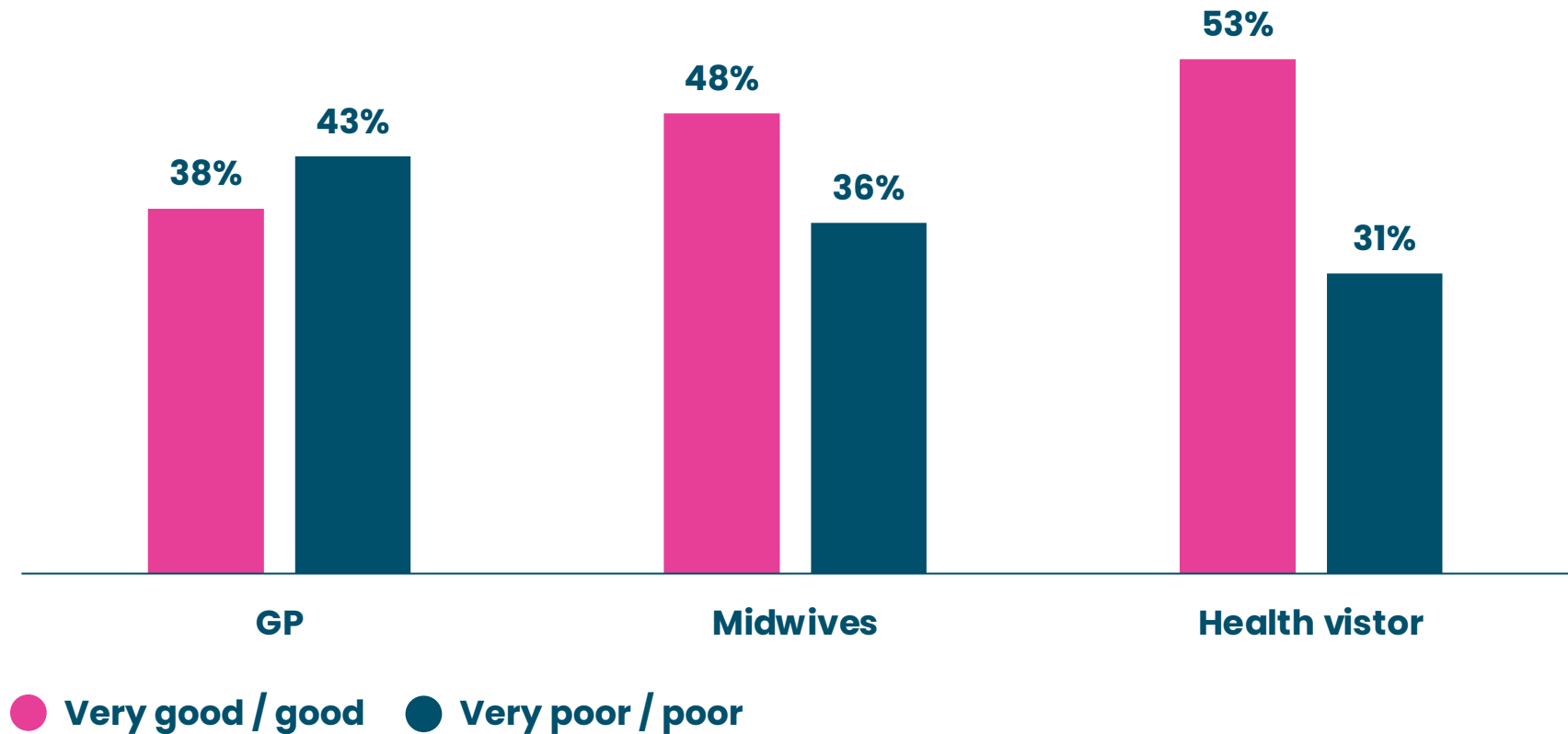
"I was referred to the local perinatal mental health team when I was 6 weeks pregnant but didn't see them until my baby was 6 weeks old (approx 40 weeks later). I was also referred to the local mother-baby unit but never seen and never assessed."

Respondents reported multiple mental health issues while waiting, including anxiety, intrusive and suicidal thoughts. Other aspects of their lives were also impacted such as income, relationships, and bonding with their baby.

Rating services

People were asked to rate the service provided by their GPs, midwives, and health visitors.

- Respondents were **more likely to rate GP services negatively** compared to the support they had received from midwives and health visitors.



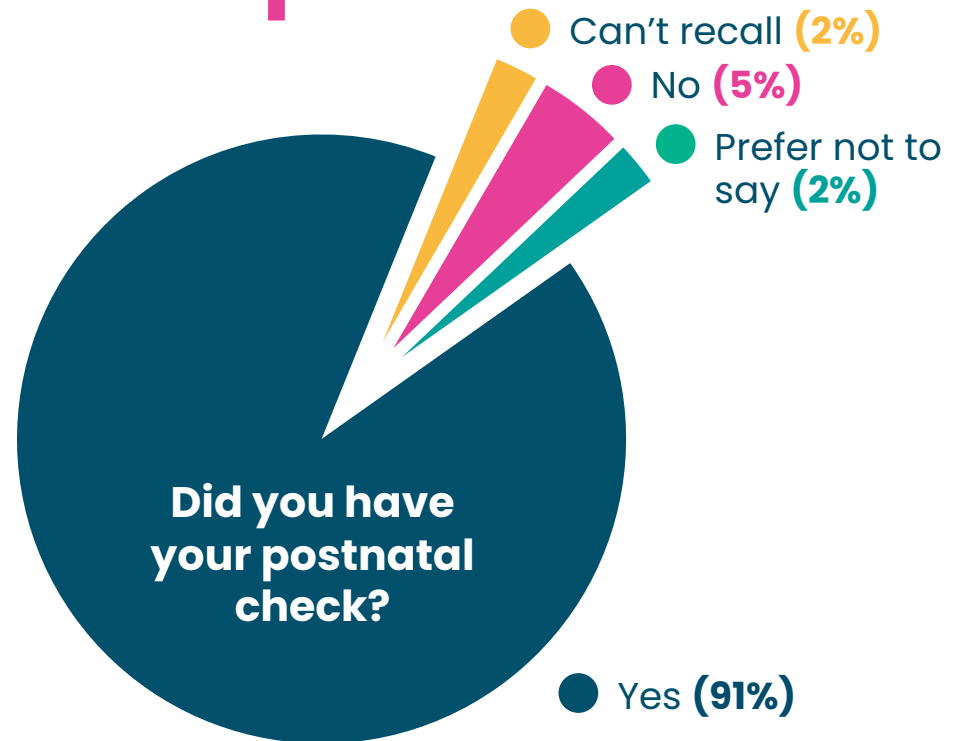


"I never received my day 10 postnatal check from the midwife. So, I went without seeing anyone from day 5 to day 19 where a health visitor saw me. My c section scar has become infected and my son had jaundice, both of which could have been caught earlier if the final midwife app had happened."



The postnatal check-up

- **91% (40)** of respondents had a postnatal check up with their GP around 6–8 weeks after birth to make sure they were well and recovering properly.
- **Two people** said they did not have their check-up, indicating that the offer of a postnatal check up is not being consistently offered to every person (this is consistent with the national trend).
- **88% (36)** of respondents had a face-to-face appointment. Other respondents had their appointment over the telephone.



These results are consistent with national data that reported **one in 10 mothers did not receive a 6–8-week postnatal check up**, and that **one in seven respondents had an over the phone appointment**.

Postnatal check-up continued...

- Of respondents that received a postnatal check up, **22% (9)** felt their GP had spoken about their mental health 'just the right amount'. However, **almost half, 49% (20)** suggested their GP had not asked about their mental health at all.
- **1 in 4 (22%/9)** were not satisfied with the time their GP had spent talking about their mental health during their check up.
- **60%(9)** of respondents with a prior mental health condition indicated their mental health had not been mentioned during their check. This is compared to **42% (11)** of people with no pre-existing mental health condition. Many felt the appointment focused just on the health of their baby.



Was mental health mentioned?

- Prefer not to say / Can't recall
- Not enough
- Just the right amount
- Not mentioned at all

In other research....

NCT (2021) found that a quarter of new mothers are not being asked about their emotional or mental health at their six-week routine GP check-up. Most people (85%) felt the appointment was focused mainly or equally on the baby's health. This was up from 45% in 2019.



“I spent the next 6 months regularly (approx once a wk) thinking about how I could end my life and whether it was best to end my daughters life too. I didn’t ask for help because my experience up to this point demonstrated that no one would actually care about my wellbeing and I didn’t want medication. Thankfully I am in a much better place now.”





What people said

Qualitative themes

Positive experiences

Six comments were positive about maternity care and support.

Positive experiences were often related to how healthcare professionals had provided sufficient care and support during complicated pregnancies, and how they had kept mothers well informed throughout. Perinatal services were mentioned as being a key service during recovery.

This feedback highlights why it is important for people to feel heard by professionals, as well as the important role of specialist maternal mental health services in providing the best possible aftercare.



“The perinatal team were incredible. Without them, I would not have recovered how I have.”

“I felt very well supported and informed throughout my pregnancy and postnatal care, with all the healthcare professionals I came into contact with being approachable and knowledgeable.”

“I was admitted seven times during my third trimester to my hospital for issues with my placenta. Every single time I got well looked after and supported.”



Not being asked

Four comments referred to the lack of consideration and mention of people's mental health.

Some comments indicated there had been a lack of interest in people's mental health from healthcare professionals, and that they had not been asked about support they may need.



“I had everything planned in terms of the birth and my mental health; however, no one in the hospital before, during, or after the birth mentioned it at all. My baby was born dead through emergency c section as the placenta detached and I also died, the staff saved our lives... Due to lockdown I was very much on my own, my mental health was still not addressed and eventually turned into complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD)”.

“I self-referred to the peri mental health team during pregnancy. Most people are not aware of it and my mental health was not really mentioned in any of my pregnancy appointments”.



People also commented about how there had been little, or no acknowledgement, about how their experience might have impacted their mental health during their postnatal check up with GPs.

For some, not being asked, meant people lost faith in services and some considered that it had resulted in further mental health problems.



“The postnatal check up at the GP was a joke. The focus was entirely on the baby and no questions were asked about my wellbeing.”

“I told the midwife postnatally I was struggling, and she said she was discharging me so to speak to Hv. Hv said speak to gp at postnatal check up, gp advised cry it out method and speak to hv. Hv then said it was normal to feel how I did, and they could refer me to talking therapies but, by the time I'd be seen, most patients felt better. I now struggle at 18m postnatal with ptsd from birth and postnatal period, and pnd. I am now under talking therapies after moving area at 7m postnatal and my hv referring me.”



Feeling heard

Six comments referred to mothers not feeling listened to.

Some people felt they weren't listened to when making decisions about their care, and that important decisions were being made without consulting them.



"Calls to the ward were never listened to, I didn't make decisions in my care and felt out of control".

"Although I chose to accept an induction, the consultant in charge of my care during induction and labour did not entertain alternative measures or conversations about them. I didn't feel like my feelings or wishes were taken into consideration at all and my choices were taken away from me."



Some also felt concerns about their own mental and physical health were being ignored by healthcare professionals, as well as their concerns regarding their baby's health.



"Awful aftercare, had ptsd re birth and not being listened to resulting in serious infection, week in hospital and then 6 weeks of therapy".

"I felt that doctor didn't understand (or care) enough to actually listen to my concerns as I was often told me it's just because I'm pregnant".



Pandemic restrictions

Eleven comments referred to the impact of covid restrictions.

Many respondents had their pregnancy during the COVID pandemic. Restrictions at hospitals often impacted on people's experience of pregnancy and labour. For example, birthing partners often had restricted access to services, and this meant that some mothers felt isolated and unsupported in key moments at all stages of their pregnancy.



"I feel that the lack of access to my husband (not allowed in due to COVID) while I was in hospital and my baby was in intensive care had a huge detrimental effect. Midwives were not willing to assist in the care of my baby where I was not physically able."

"Not being able to have my partner stay on the ward in the post-natal period had a negative effect on our experience. Having a baby during covid had a negative effect on my mental health."

"There was hardly any support through COVID and not being able to have my husband with me was hard. Also being told in august 2020 I had had a miscarriage whilst my husband was sat in the car park not being able to support was heart breaking."





“I suffered postnatal depression. I can never forgive being induced alone on a ward not allowing my husband to be with me until birth which he only just made due to labour suddenly progressing quickly. My husband now does not want more children as found the experience traumatic leaving me behind”.



Feeling unsupported

16 comments referred to a perceived lack of support provided to mothers during pregnancy, labour and after birth.

Some felt there was an inadequate level of support provided during their pregnancy, and one respondent said this meant they had needed to seek private support. When support was offered, some felt it had been inconsistent because of a lack of continuity with health professionals.



“Awful aftercare, had ptsd re birth and not being listened to resulting in serious infection, week in hospital and then six weeks of therapy.”

“I suffered with PGP and no services were open to help with pain management/relief and was off fobbed off as something I just had to “get on with”, resulting in becoming wheelchair bound.”

“This was my first pregnancy. The doctor told me that she thought I was going through an ectopic pregnancy before even checking me over and told me they didn’t want to do an internal exam as they could abort the baby. She referred me to the hospital and said they would call me within 24 hours. They did, but told me they don’t deal with this and just advised to call back if I started to bleed more. We ended up booking in a private scan to check everything was OK.”



Some people also felt unsupported by midwives following their birth. People sometimes struggled to care for their newborn for various reasons, and felt staff had not been able to support them. These concerns had been exacerbated by the absence of birthing partners during the pandemic.



“Midwives were not willing to assist in the care of my baby where I was not physically able.”

“Support on labour ward abysmal. Used my own knowledge to help myself others wouldn’t be so lucky.”

“When I was transferred to a ward, I was still bleeding heavily and the midwife left me at my bedside telling me she would get someone to bring me a pad to sit on. After 10mins standing, I gave up and sat on the bed. The pad never arrived, and I bled on the sheets. No one told me where the toilets were or that it was okay to go and leave my baby. When I couldn’t wait any longer, I found someone to ask”.



Staff attitude

Nine comments referred to the attitude of healthcare professionals, or examples of poor communication between professionals and patients.



"During labour the midwife told me to stop making a 'silly' noise as it wasn't helping".

"One midwife put her head round the curtain and judgmentally said 'don't do that, she'll overheat' when she realised my daughter was only in a vest under a blanket she said 'oh it's ok' without apologising to me. The midwife snatched the car seat off my husband at the ward door and then barked at me to get off the ward as quick as SHE could move."



In addition, some felt professionals communicated in a way they could not understand, leaving them unaware of what was happening during their care.



"Hospital staff after scans were terrible, shouting across waiting room, not explaining things, couldn't have cared less. After being referred for an additional scan even my midwife was confused about what was happening. Notes are written in code in your book between midwife & hospital which feels intentional to not share information with you."

