



# Maternity care and support

A summary of lived experience

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**healthwatch**  
Suffolk

Trusted Insights

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## 1. About Healthwatch Suffolk CIC

Healthwatch Suffolk CIC is a social enterprise delivering insight to shape local NHS and social care. We passionately believe that listening and responding to people's lived experiences is vital to create health and care services that work for everyone.

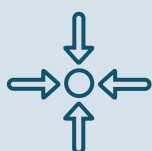
We collect and share lived experience to improve standards of health and social care in Suffolk, regionally and nationally. Our independent role is enshrined in law, supported by trusted data and embedded in local integrated care systems by established relationships with partners.

Our service is founded on long-standing values of transparency, accountability and accessibility. We want everybody to feel equally valued, listened to, seen and heard.



### Our core purpose is to...

Collect and share lived experience to influence better standards of health and social care.



### We live and breathe...

Co-production in everything possible. We are inclusive, transparent, accessible, and accountable. We believe passionately that listening and responding to lived experience is vital to create health and care services that meet people's needs.

For more information about our role, and how we are inclusive, please [visit our website](#).

## 2. About this report

This briefing has been produced to inform continued debate and service improvement regarding maternity care in Suffolk. It is a general summary of patient experience recorded by Healthwatch Suffolk (HWS) February 2023 - 24th March 2024.

To inform the report, we coordinated an informal call for people's experiences throughout March 2024. Several reasons for the call were identified, and included:

- The information updates on local understanding of the experiences people have within services gained from, for example, the national Care Quality Commission maternity survey people completed a year previously.
- The local NHS has a focus on women's health, and we aim to shape that work with people's experiences.
- The local Health Scrutiny Committee has an ongoing interest in people's experiences of maternity care, and will debate the subject (with a focus on services provided by the James Paget University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust) in April 2024.
- Previous feedback about maternity care has told us that maternity care needed

to improve. We want to know if people's experiences are getting better locally.

- It is important that the maternity system has access to feedback gathered independently of local providers.

### Data source

The data available within this report has been exported from the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre ([www.healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/services](http://www.healthwatchesuffolk.co.uk/services)). It's a platform people can use to find, rate and leave reviews about all NHS and social care services in Suffolk.

The Feedback Centre currently features in excess of 22,000 items of feedback about hundreds of local services, generally recorded by:

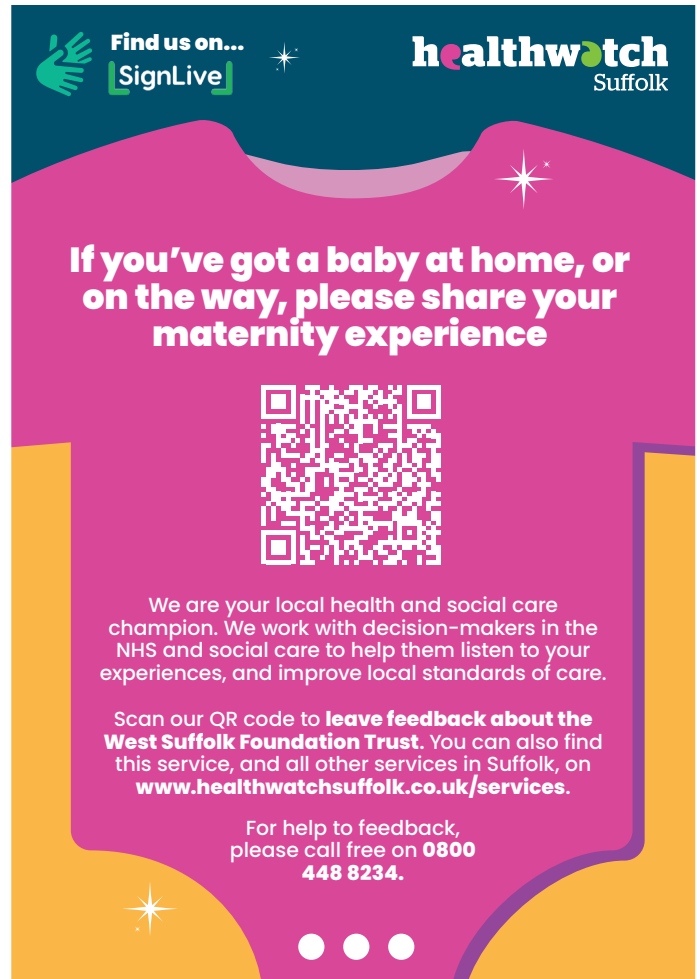
- Healthwatch Suffolk Community Development Officers (CDOs) working in the community.
- Visitors to the Healthwatch Suffolk website (from searches online, or through links available on social media).

### Promotion of the opportunity to feedback

Communication about the opportunity to feedback was launched on the Healthwatch Suffolk website and promoted widely on social media. Facebook alone reported a total reach of more than 10,000 people, contributing to more than 600 views of related content on the Healthwatch Suffolk website within the period.

Additionally, the West Suffolk NHS Foundation trust (WSFT), East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust (ESNEFT) and the James Paget University Hospitals NHS Foundation trust (JPUH) were each approached with a request to support the call. A poster specific to each trust was created, and hospitals were encouraged to display it prominently within their service environments.

It was also hoped that each of the trusts



Hospitals have been encouraged to display a poster within their maternity service environments in March 2024, and on an ongoing basis, to ensure people are informed of their right to share independent feedback.

would support communications about the call in other ways (e.g., on websites, within digital groups/networks, or across their social media accounts).

WSFT facilitated opportunities for HWS Community Development Officers to engage people visiting the antenatal clinic within the hospital, and community midwifery services within Newmarket Hospital, Sudbury Health Centre and Maple House (Bury St Edmunds).

## How many experiences are included?

A total of 122 comments have been exported from the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre and included in the analysis. Examples of anonymous feedback are featured throughout to illustrate key themes and sentiment.

## For more information

Please contact [info@healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk](mailto:info@healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk), or call freephone 0800 448 8234 to connect with our team.

# Feedback Centre

Analysis of feedback recorded on the Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre ([www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/services](http://www.healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/services)).



### 3. About the Feedback Centre

The Healthwatch Suffolk Feedback Centre is a platform people can use to find, rate and review any health or social care service in Suffolk.

There are more than 22,000 reviews currently listed against hundreds of local services. All feedback is moderated by the Healthwatch Suffolk team to make sure it is not abusive, that it is grounded in a genuine experience of using a service, and that it does not identify any person.

### 4. Summary

There is an overall uplift in positive sentiment evident across the feedback since our briefing about people’s experiences of maternity care between 2021 and 2022. This previous report, published to shape and inform the development of a local maternity strategy for Suffolk and north east Essex, is available from <https://healthwatchsuffolk.co.uk/news/maternityservices2022/>.

Although the proportion of entirely positive reviews has not increased significantly, there is a much greater frequency of mixed comments that include praise for services (particularly staff). Entirely negative reviews have declined somewhat because of this trend in the data.

| Service     | Positive | Mixed | Negative | Comments |
|-------------|----------|-------|----------|----------|
| 2023 - 2024 | 55%      | 25%   | 20%      | 122      |
| 2021 - 2022 | 46%      | 12%   | 41%      | 147      |

The change in the sentiment of some people’s experiences is reflected in a few comments from those who had accessed services in previous years. Such comments also reveal a lasting loss of trust in the support people may expect.

*“Five years ago at the WS hospital I had my first baby and it was an horrendous experience, I wasn’t listened to by the maternity staff when I was in need after my waters had broken. It has taken me five years to decide to do it again but I am hesitant... I have paid privately for a midwife to be with me as an extra support this time which I know not everyone could afford, but I need that extra reassurance. Staff have been kind to date this time.”*

*“After having my previous child a couple of years ago and this one a few months ago, I was able to see the difference in the continuity of care teams. It was excellent and made such a difference to me. Yes, COVID will have played a part last time, but seeing the same team helped so much, which in a way I would have expected in COVID due to having ‘bubbles’. I would say too that the mental health support was really good too, as the last experience was difficult due to COVID and lack of support from family being allowed, and it being my first. So, I was nervous, but they were brilliant.”*

“I’m early in my pregnancy so I haven’t had much contact with the department yet but it’s been very good so far and I’ve had great staff at all points so far. They have provided the right amount of information and support... I had our first baby during COVID and it was very difficult not having my partner with me during the labour and at that point I didn’t feel overly listened to either. However, they were extreme times and it won’t be like that this time around.”

Increased positivity is evident within many of the themes explored in people’s experiences. For example, it was clear that more people had commented favourably about the interactions they had with maternity staff. A majority of the references to this were positive, although it is clear not everyone’s experience had been so consistent.

We know from our previous reports that interaction with maternity staff has a major influence on how people feel about their maternity experience overall. Just one positive or negative interaction can make a considerable difference to how people perceive the support they have received from maternity services. It is therefore positive that people’s impressions about the approach of staff has changed significantly, and for the better.

People value the support of staff most when their care had been approached with kindness, empathy, and compassion. Sensitivity in key moments of vulnerability was particularly important, but not necessarily experienced by all. In fact a few people told us they had felt pressured into decision-making by staff, with little opportunity for control over important decisions about their care.

When people had turned to services for support, a majority had been able to access care, information, treatment or advice when they had needed it. A total of 78% of the comments referencing this theme were positive, particularly where people had experienced worries or scares during their pregnancy. They had valued the responsiveness of services in those moments, and felt contact with staff had been warm and reassuring.

Some areas for improvement remain evident within the least positive themes. For example, a number of people commented about a perceived lack of attentiveness by staff on postnatal wards and in communities (including with regard to feeding support). Furthermore, there were 17 negative comments about the extent to which people had felt involved in their treatment or care, or decisions affecting their baby. Both of these themes were noted as areas for improvement in our last briefing, though levels of negative sentiment have reduced since that time.

Integration of services had been an issue for several people who had chosen a hospital for delivery that was not aligned with their community midwifery team.

*“Living in Stowmarket made pregnancy experience difficult, the midwifery is led by Ipswich however I wished to deliver at West Suffolk, due to this there is a lack in communication and different guidelines for each trust... As a first time mum to*



*be, the different trusts made pregnancy extra stressful, specially as someone who has back issues which should of been factored into account during pregnancy so that upon delivery Hospital have all the facts. Due to them not doing so meant minimal options for pain relief, resulting in traumatic birth via forceps under general anaesthetic which I believe is rare. I must stress though, both trusts are nice, the midwives I met along my pregnancy journey were polite, helpful and made me feel at ease, just like the midwives at West Suffolk during delivery."*

*"It was lovely to see the same midwife each time but it felt like there was a real disconnect between having an Ipswich based midwife but being under WSH."*

*"Living in Stowmarket mothers are given a choice of Ipswich or west Suffolk delivery. However when delivering at west Suffolk you are cared for by Ipswich midwives. My midwife went off sick late in my pregnancy and then I met a different midwife every week, around 6. This is really hard around the time of birth as you often feel more vulnerable, especially when being offered sweeps and checks from someone you've never met before and in the immediate few days post birth when hormones are difficult. The care was mostly OK. However understandably the midwives in the community don't know how WSH works and the notes aren't joined up at all leaving room for gaps in communication. This is as potential safety issue."*

Overall, we believe the feedback reflects an improving quality of maternity care locally and it is certainly encouraging to have received a much higher quantity of entirely positive reviews about people's experiences. This has been particularly true of the interactions people have had with maternity staff across services and this must be a reflection of the hard work of NHS staff delivering care under challenging circumstances.

Whilst improvements in the quality of care are to be celebrated, there remains a high proportion of people for whom maternity care could have been better. For many, their experience had not been entirely unsatisfactory and aspects of their care had been positive (e.g., perceived levels of care may have varied between services or staff). For others, the experience of maternity care and support had been entirely negative, even traumatic, with lasting consequences for their wellbeing.

It remains vital that our local maternity and neonatal systems continue to proactively seek and respond to people's experiences of care, and to focus on improvement. It is clear that existing strategies have helped to recover services and we hope this positive trend in the overall sentiment of people's experiences will continue so that more people have the opportunity to experience the type of maternity care they should rightly expect.

## 5. Feedback sentiment and ratings

Out of **2,905** comments recorded to the Feedback Centre within the period (regarding all services in Suffolk), **122** reviews were relevant to this analysis.

Of the 122 comments included, 55% are positive, 25% are neutral or mixed, and 20% are negative overall. More detail is included in the table below, which includes a breakdown of how the feedback applies to different services.

It is noted that the quantities of feedback reported are not sufficient to claim that the opinions expressed are representative of the entire population of people who have accessed maternity care or support. The feedback provided is nonetheless important and is likely to be a fair reflection people’s experiences.

| Service                                       | Positive  | Mixed     | Negative  | Comments   |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| <b>All services</b>                           | <b>67</b> | <b>30</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>122</b> |
| West Suffolk Foundation Trust                 | 25        | 8         | 7         | 40         |
| East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust | 7         | 7         | 7         | 21         |
| James Paget University Hospitals FT           | 5         | 3         | 2         | 10         |
| Community Midwives                            | 20        | 9         | 4         | 33         |
| Other services                                | 9         | 1         | 5         | 15         |

The Feedback Centre includes an option for people to apply a star rating to services. The table below shows the average star rating (out of five) people attributed to individual services and all services. In addition, and across all services, the following ratings were also recorded:

- Staff attitude - 3.8 (based on 46 ratings)
- Quality of care - 3.8 (based on 52 ratings)

| Services                                      | Average rating | Comments   |
|---|----------------|------------|
| <b>All services</b>                           | <b>4.0</b>     | <b>122</b> |
| West Suffolk Foundation Trust                 | 4.4            | 40         |
| East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust | 3.3            | 21         |
| James Paget University Hospitals              | 3.5            | 10         |
| Community Midwives                            | 4.4            | 33         |
| Other services                                | 3.7            | 15         |

**“Was fully supported when attending the maternity unit when I was 32 weeks pregnant and hadn’t felt baby move in a while. Was fully reassured and checked. When going in to give birth staff listened to me although didn’t quite believe I was fully in established labour as I was managing the pain well! I was listened to during my labour and when discussing how I would like to give birth.**

**“My mum and partner were also supported well by my midwife and student midwife when speaking of my partners anxiety and fear of hospital environments. When concerns were raised by the midwives towards the end of my labour about my baby’s heartbeat staff acted quickly in taking me out of the pool and into a delivery room for monitoring. We were explained to about what was happening at all times. Our wishes were followed...”**

James Paget University Hospitals

## 6. Qualitative themes (Summary)

### Top themes - levels of positive sentiment

| Theme                                   | Positive sentiment | Comments |
|---|--------------------|----------|
| Staff attitude                          | 82%                | 76       |
| Access to services when needed          | 78%                | 41       |
| Staff knowledge and advice              | 65%                | 40       |
| Involvement in care and decision-making | 47%                | 32       |
| Postnatal care and support              | 33%                | 18       |
| Continuity of care                      | 73%                | 11       |
| Digital care and support                | 82%                | 11       |
| Support with feeding                    | 30%                | 10       |
| Mental health and wellbeing             | 50%                | 10       |

Several of the most prominent themes in people’s feedback are described below in more detail, including examples of lived experience.

### Interaction with staff

We know from previous reports that interaction with maternity staff has a major influence on how people feel about their maternity experience overall. It is therefore encouraging that most people held positive views about the way in which they had been supported by staff across services. In total, 76 reviews included a reference to the approach and attitude of maternity staff. Of these, 62 (82%) were entirely positive, 6 were mixed, and 8 were negative.

It was clear that people had particularly valued contact with staff who were empathetic, friendly, and approachable. This included staff who took time to be accessible, listen to questions or concerns, and acknowledge them with kind reassurance.

*“The community midwife team in Felixstowe are amazing. This was my second pregnancy and I was hoping that the same midwife was still the midwife at Haven Health and she was - I was thrilled... I am a nervous patient, and her kind and compassionate manner is amazing. She*

*has a way of putting you at ease which I haven't experienced before... I had a bit of a meltdown one appointment because I was worried about the birth in a couple of months and she was so kind and saw me a couple of extra times to help me manage my worries." – **Community midwives***

*"It's been nearly a year since my daughter was born, and the care I received from the midwives and consultant at the hospital was exceptional. I always felt informed and listened to. I knew what was happening why things were happening and was treated with dignity, compassion and care always." – **James Paget University Hospitals***

*"I had a home birth and both midwives were so caring and kind. Let me do my thing but offered support and help when needed. We ended up being transferred into hospital for precautionary reasons and they stayed with us the whole time. Same level of care carried on with each visit after we returned home. Cannot fault any of my experience at all!" – **Community midwives***

*"I've only had one appointment so far but the midwife I saw was lovely and very approachable." – **Community Midwives***

consistent. Eight people highlighted some level of concern about their contact with staff at different stages of their maternity experience. Negative feedback was generally attributed to instances where staff appeared not to listen to people, were dismissive, or lacked sensitivity in their bedside manner.

In a couple of rarer cases, people felt that the actions of staff had belittled them and that they had been pressured or coerced into making decisions they might not otherwise have made.

*"From the moment I entered the hospital to give birth, I feel like I gave up all control over how I wanted things to go. I was denied pain medication, anti-nausea medication, despite being told I could have it, I was just never given it... The only person I have a positive memory of is the Dr who actually delivered the baby. They seemed to be the only one who spoke to me with real kindness and compassion and took the time to check in with me and my partner to see how we were doing. Everyone else just told me what I could or couldn't do or gave me instructions and didn't listen to my needs at all." – **James Paget University Hospitals***

Many of the comments that included references to staff attitude were positive, but not everyone's experience had been so



*"I contacted the maternity triage unit in the morning and shared the concerns I had about my pregnancy. They were empathetic, helpful and supportive on the phone and arranged an appointment for me within 30-minutes time. I arrived at the unit and was seen very quickly and greeted by friendly and professional staff, they made me feel at ease and the process for checking me out was quick and efficient.*

***"They were reassuring throughout and explained to me what was happening."***

**– West Suffolk Foundation Trust**





**“Had a previous ‘still born’ baby, which was heart breaking as you can imagine. The service knew this and I had a dedicated ‘rainbow’ midwife who I could call and access whenever I needed some reassurance, questions, at any time of day/night.**

**“I was able to access extra scans too, for the reassurance too and they were timely. I accessed these twice, and they helped a great deal in settling down my anxiety. They looked after me so well and I was kept in for 5 days to help me get a good level of confidence up with my new born. Really could not have asked for a better experience in helping me through this tough time.”**

**- East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust**



*“The midwives on antenatal ruined what has been an otherwise good experience through my pregnancy. They did not listen to me at all, made me feel as though I was an inconvenience and that they were more bothered with getting me in and out as fast as possible... A real shame as everyone else I have come into contact with across community midwives, consultants, ultrasound etc have all been amazing.” - East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

*“...A different consultant was incredibly curt and rude. They made it seem like I had been reckless to allow myself to go over and put a table of stats on the dangers of going overdue in front of me, and it felt like it was to shame me. What other reason could there be? It’s not as if I could go back in time and choose to be induced even if I wanted to. It made me cry. My midwife for my labour was brilliant. They didn’t make one wrong step and put me at ease. I’m so grateful to them for listening to me and asking/giving me choices rather than directing me throughout my labour... The consultant should have treaded more lightly. I was a heavily pregnant woman that felt vulnerable. I was on my own. I can only hope that they were having a*

*bad day.” - East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

*“It’s not been great, I’ve got a new community midwife and they are really bossy. I know I’m young but they talk to me like I’m stupid. They aren’t as nice as the midwife I had before. It’s ruining my joy...” - Community Midwives*

## Accessing services

A total of 41 reviews (78%) were positive about being able to access services when they needed support. This included that services had been responsive, particularly for those who had experienced worries or scares during their pregnancy, and also for those who had been monitored closely because of known complications.

It was clear that, for some facing complicated pregnancies, services had ensured specific measures were in place to help people to feel supported. This had included options to be able to access care or advice when it was needed.

*“Been well supported by both the hospital and community team. Whenever I’ve*

*needed to come in for additional checks there's never been a problem and I've been well supported with this pregnancy. I'm having twins and feel staff have explained issues well and have been accommodating with appointments so that they've taken place at the same time as other appointments to reduce visits to the hospital. Staff have proactively offered information, including information about free parking."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"I'm having a very complicated pregnancy and have been completely happy with everything the team here at the hospital are doing. I have appointments everyday, scans weekly and a daily ECG and all staff have been very informative and reassuring. They are happy to listen but also answer any questions we have and nothing is too much bother for them. They are doing everything they possibly can and have been really accommodating."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"Been offered good support and get quick responses using the online service, and whenever I call or email I get quick responses."* – **Community Midwives**

*"Always had a friendly welcome when my baby doesn't move and I'm worried and I phone the hospital. The triage always see me and are welcoming nice and friendly. I trust them with their assessments and my community midwife always advises I phone if I have any problems."* – **Community midwives**

*"I saw the same midwife for each appointment and received really good care. All appointments were arranged well and I had lots of extra appointments to monitor my baby's growth and everything at all points was well explained. Once I'd had my baby I was well supported around feeding and given advice to help."* – **Community Midwives**

referred to the extent to which people had needed to wait to access care. While some positive comments simply stated a lack of wait, others highlighted the relief they felt at being seen quickly, particularly when there were concerns about their health, or the health of their baby.

*"I've had to wait just two weeks for a very early baby scan so pleased I didn't have to wait long."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"Antenatal appointments have been quick to get."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"Generally the service is incredible. I had an early scare in the pregnancy and they were great and got me in quickly."* – **East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust**

*"I contacted the maternity triage unit in the morning and shared the concerns I had about my pregnancy, they were empathetic, helpful and supportive on the phone and arranged an appointment for me within 30-minutes time. I arrived at the unit and was seen very quickly and greeted by friendly and professional staff, they made me feel at ease and the process for checking me out was quick and efficient. They were reassuring throughout and explained to me what was happening."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

In contrast, four comments highlighted how delays and waits for treatment had led to increased stress, anxiety and general inconvenience.

*"It is incredibly and unnecessarily difficult to book an appointment with the practice. Our baby had a high temperature and was vomiting and the only way to get an appointment was to call at 8am when there were 59 ahead of us in the queue. We spent well over an hour on the phone and then were told we needed to call back at 12pm. We then needed to wait for someone to call us back later in the afternoon. This makes it extremely difficult to book an appointment, especially for anyone*

Comments within this broad theme often

### *who works during the day.” – A local GP practice*

*“Individual midwives and staff were mostly excellent. However staff were so severely overstretched that when I was starting labour, despite requesting it, I couldn’t get pain relief for 7 hours until the next shift started. Had other delays in care due to shortages too.” – James Paget University Hospitals*

Not everyone had a positive experience of being able to access support when they needed it. Nine reviews were negative or mixed in their sentiment. This is a noteworthy improvement in sentiment since we asked people to share their feedback in 2021 and 2022.

*“I’m currently pregnant now, suffered on and off bleeding since 12 weeks, not much support as I’m early in pregnancy but have a negative blood type, I was advised to a&e to be referred to maternity, I don’t feel this is the correct place to have to sit around for potentially hours!! To get maternity help. Again not everyone has a good support network at home to be able to disappear for hours, I understand miscarriages can’t be prevented but having a phone number that actually has support for early issues would be very handy and not get referred to a&e or have opening hours on specific telephone numbers.” – East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

*“I struggled to get hold of the midwives. All I had was an email address. I emailed asking for advice when I had covid in the 3rd trimester and received no reply, and then I emailed again at 38 weeks to request that colostrum syringes be made available for me to collect, but didn’t get a reply. I have therefore run out and only have 5 syringes to take to hospital. The midwife was always lovely but the lack of ability to get in touch other than an email that doesn’t get answered is really unhelpful.” – Community Midwives*

*“Called to be told I could potentially have my section the next day and to prepare by taking all necessary meds. Wasn’t called until after 7am that morning to be told it wasn’t going ahead [for another two days].... Now, the day of my planned c section. I am over 39 weeks (39w+3) and have been nil by mouth since 6am to be told at midday that my section will likely not go ahead and would I like to go home... Worried about the fact that previous labour was very quick and that baby is breech (risk of loss of oxygen etc). Feel completely messed around and lied to. Have lost all confidence in the hospital.” – West Suffolk Foundation Trust*

## Staff knowledge, communication, and advice

This theme is inclusive of all comments that made a reference to the information or advice people had received from services or maternity staff. It is a broad theme, with many aspects of information and advice considered (e.g., the extent to which people had received advice or communication about their care, the knowledge of staff in services, and any references to information and signposting from services).

Most of the reviews were positive, consistent with other themes. In total, 26 reviews included entirely positive references to the theme, while one was mixed, and 13 were negative. References to this theme were often brief or generic (e.g., that staff were knowledgeable or had explained things well).

Positive references included:

*“Birth swift – consultant knowledgeable, however, needs to be mindful of communication when dealing with stressful situations. All midwives were kind, knowledgeable and caring.” – East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

*“I attended the antenatal clinic for our first scan and all contact with the staff was*



*really good. Everyone has been so lovely and friendly and explained every step. The portal is nice and simple to set up and use and my community midwife was brilliant.”*  
– **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*“Throughout my pregnancy I received wonderful care and advice. During labour I felt supported and empowered. I can not fault the care from the midwives pre and post birth.”* – **James Paget University Hospitals**

*“Been well supported by both the hospital and community team. Whenever I’ve needed to come in for additional checks there’s never been a problem and I’ve been well supported with this pregnancy. I’m having twins and feel staff have explained issues well and have been accommodating with appointments so that they’ve taken place at the same time as other appointments to reduce visits to the hospital. Staff have proactively offered information including information about free parking.”*

*“I attended the antenatal clinic for my first scan and all staff have been polite and helpful. I’ve seen my community midwife too and they provided lots of information which was explained well. They were lovely and filled me with confidence. It’s great that appointments have been planned ahead and are already in the diary.”*

*a vaginal breech birth. I was even told that if I were to birth vaginally, ‘it would cause a lot of upset here’ (with the staff). They need up-to-date training. It is harmful to women to limit their birthing options by having staff who do not know how to facilitate this.”*

*“I found there was limited support. I was not aware that there was a reflections service to help with difficult births and the breastfeeding support and information about what support is available more widely was limited. I had an induction followed by an emergency c section and my partner was sent home very soon after the birth because he was told he was a risk even though we were in a private side room so I didn’t have the best of experiences on the ward.”* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*“When I called the early miscarriage team the message on the phone didn’t make it clear I could potentially wait 8 hours for a response. When this happened and I was worried all day I didn’t know what to do. I did finally get a call back and was offered a scan but it was a very difficult day.”* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

Negative or mixed comments tended to reflect on missing advice or information (e.g., that aspects of care and support had not been explained well to people, or that potentially useful information about support had not been made available or shared when people needed it).

*“...consultants did not fully explain risks of a c-section but instead would harp on about the risks of a vaginal birth. That is not gaining informed consent. That is plain manipulation. They just wanted to push me down the route that would be easiest for them. Staff were not prepared to deal with*

**“I feel disappointed in the care I received. It seemed no one took charge.**

**“I gave birth in Ipswich hospital, I went in at midnight and my son was born later in the morning. During this short time I had seven midwives and none of them were with me for very long – they were taken to an emergency or another woman came in. No one read my birth preferences and I didn’t feel heard or cared for. ”**

East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust



## Involvement in care and decision-making

A total of 32 reviews provided insight into the extent to which people were included and involved in decisions regarding their maternity care. Of these, 15 were positive, none were mixed and 17 were negative.

These comments included feedback on whether staff had provided sufficient information, considered people's preferences, and consulted them when appropriate.

Positive references included:

*"It's been nearly a year since my daughter was born, and the care I received from the midwives and consultant at the hospital was exceptional. I always felt informed and listened to. I knew what was happening why things were happening and was treated with dignity, compassion and care always." – James Paget University Hospitals*

*"I was listened to during my labour and when discussing how I would like to give birth. My mum and partner were also supported well by my midwife and student midwife when speaking of my partner's anxiety and fear of hospital environments. When concerns were raised by the midwives towards the end of my labour about my baby's heartbeat staff acted quickly in taking me out of the pool and into a delivery room for monitoring. We were explained to about what was happening at all times. Our wishes were followed following the birth of our baby boy. I had to wait several hours to have stitches after tearing, staff explained this was due to emergencies needing to go in to theatre. During this time staff checked in regularly on us and kept us up to date with when I would go to theatre." – James Paget University Hospitals*

*"I recently had twin girls, I was admitted onto ward 11 due to pre-eclampsia, every*

*single midwife, nurse and student midwife I was looked after by were amazing, every single one supported my wishes even when the consultant (just one) was against them, I ended up having a emergency c-section under general anaesthesia and after a few days was put into delivery where again every midwife I had were amazing, my twins were in neonatal and staff in there were all fantastic keeping me and my partner well informed and relaxed, I couldn't have wished for better care and understanding from ward 11 and delivery suite midwives, students and nurses all were exceptional in their care and support." – West Suffolk Foundation Trust*

Negative reviews about being involved in maternity care tended to focus on experiences where there had been a lack of discussion or choice in key decisions affecting people's care, and where people had developed an overall sense that their concerns or attempts to seek assistance had been dismissed or ignored by staff.

*"Consultants did not fully explain risks of a c-section but instead would harp on about the risks of a vaginal birth. That is not gaining informed consent. That is plain manipulation. They just wanted to push me down the route that would be easiest for them. Staff were not prepared to deal with a vaginal breech birth. I was even told that if I were to birth vaginally, "it would cause a lot of upset here" (with the staff). They need up to date training. It is harmful to women to limit their birthing options by having staff who do not know how to facilitate this." – East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

*"When I was in labour, I had difficulty convincing the midwife to check things were progressing as they didn't want to check me. I was 4 weeks early and by the time they checked me the first time I was 8 cm dilated. I was then moved quickly to a delivery suite." – West Suffolk Foundation Trust*

*"I didn't feel like I had a choice about induction, no discussion or even asked if I wanted it. Only offered one sweep. I had to chase my day 10 discharge appointment (19 days after emergency c section) to be checked over both myself and baby and have a stitch removed." – **Community Midwives***

*"When I went in to have my baby I was not supported well by staff. I have autism and staff didn't really know how to handle the situation and they hadn't sought advice from the LD liaison nurse either..." – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust***

Related to the theme of involvement in care and decision-making, 11 comments specifically referenced birth plans or planning, of which three were positive and eight were negative.

Birth plans are an important way in which new and expectant Mum's can prepare for and influence their birth experience. When birth planning works well, the experience can be very empowering. For one expectant mum, working through a birth plan with her healthcare professionals had helped to ease her anxieties around the delivery of her baby.

*"From my first referral appointment to the care post birth has been phenomenal. They helped with my birth plan to ease further triggers which helped immensely in the delivery of my baby. Have always been supportive and are adaptive to my individual needs. Their nursery nurses are also a massive asset to their team." – **Suffolk Perinatal Mental Health Service***

*"They were calm, kind, respectful and followed my birth plan requests. I didn't want to have pain relief other than gas and air and when my daughter started coming along quickly and I felt in more pain they helped me with gas and air and didn't push other pain relief options on me as they knew my wishes. Throughout the 3 hours from arrival to my daughter*

*being born I was kept calm, provided with a lovely big fan when I was boiling hot and helped on my birthing journey incredibly calmly which helped me no end." – **East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust***

However, when situations change suddenly, actions deviate from those agreed within the plan, or a lack of information prevents timely adjustments to the plan, mothers can be left feeling vulnerable and marginalised. Five comments highlighted the negative experiences mothers had of birth planning.

*"Even though I had wanted and expected a home birth the plan needed to change. I kept the midwives informed of what was happening but was then asked to go in to hospital because they were short of staff. The birth was fine and the staff were good and they supported me when I wanted to get back home as early as I could. After the birth I do feel that the support rather drops away. On the lead up to it there is lots of support and information but after not so much." – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust***

*"The staff kept sending me home during my labour in spite of the fact that my consultant stipulated that I should be monitored for the whole labour due to previous complications. I was also supposed to have an IV drip during labour as I carry Strep B, this was not put in place. We almost lost our baby and would have done but for the quick actions of one registrar and the fact that I ignored the midwives advice to stay home and admitted myself to the maternity block. I have also had two other bad experiences with births previous to this." – **East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust***

*"Told we were overreacting when we were trying to plan for all eventualities and they didn't seem interested in safety planning." – **Suffolk Perinatal Mental Health Service***

*"I had planned a home birth. I found out at 39 weeks my baby was breech and I had low fluid. I ended up having an*

*unsuccessful ECV procedure and a few days later, a c-section. I should've been told baby was breech when I had a growth scan at 36 weeks but the sonographer failed to tell me." – East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

In addition to the reviews people shared about their overall experiences, the Feedback Centre also asked, 'Did you feel that staff kept you involved in, and informed about, decisions about your care?'. A total of 26 people offered a response, of which 17 had felt involved and informed and 9 had not. Comments included:

*"I was more than included and informed and always went above and beyond to explain things."*

*"I was given initial plans but then never updated. Was very very poor! Staff spent time talking at the midwife station instead of actually updating us on what was happening."*

*"I had to battle to decline certain things. I had to ask for balanced information. If I had just relied upon the information that I was given by most of the consultants, I would not have had informed choices."*

*"The midwives on antenatal unit no. Especially when having a sweep which was a horrific experience in the hospital causing a lot of pain and not being told whilst it was happening that it wasn't going to be possible. Having the same performed by my community midwife was a completely different experience where I felt comfortable, listened to and respected."*

*"No, I was denied information on why the Dr wanted to examine my cervix being told I wouldnt understand. Eventually the midwife managed to get him to give the information which was very easy to understand – I declined that examination."*

*"I was informed, but left out of the decision making. They just told me what they were going to do."*

*"Yes. At all times, staff communicated to me and my husband and we felt supported us to make decisions that were always in both mine and baby's best interests."*

*"No the communication was poor which made a stressful situation terrifying."*

## Postnatal care and support with feeding

Of the 18 reviews that referred to postnatal care and support, 11 were negative, one was mixed, and six were positive.

It is clear some people continue to experience a change in the support available immediately following the birth of their baby. This had been particularly noticeable for people who had struggled with breastfeeding or who might have experienced birth trauma or complications.

*"Generally, the service is incredible. I had an early scare in the pregnancy and they were great and got me in quickly. I then had an emergency c-section and the staff were all amazing. But, after the birth, my baby stopped breathing and was rushed off to special care. I didn't get to see my baby, and overnight I had no update on how they were either. The member of staff I had contact with overnight was most unhelpful, it was hard not knowing what was happening. When the shift changed a new midwife was incredible, she spoke to me and then got me an update, she was incredible." – East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

The theme included a total of 10 references to the support people had received around infant feeding, of which three were positive, and seven were negative.

*"...I did have to make several calls and emails to the infant feeding team for breastfeeding support."*

*"I had one midwife throughout my labour and was well supported after the birth with feeding my daughter as she struggled to latch on well but the staff were great and I was very grateful for the support."* -**West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"I saw the same midwife for each appointment and received really good care. All appointments were arranged well and I had lots of extra appointments to monitor my baby's growth and everything at all points was well explained. Once I'd had my baby I was well supported around feeding and given advice to help."* -**Community Midwives**

***“The one issue we did have was I identified my baby had a tongue tie (I work on a neonatal unit so aware of these) our midwife said that they would place a referral to have this assessed and seen however, after not hearing anything for nearly three weeks, I discussed this with the breastfeeding support team who followed this up and found that a referral for me or my baby hadn’t been received at the tongue-tie clinic. Luckily the breastfeeding team were able to help and organised for my baby to have his RLF really quickly afterwards.*”**

***“This did have an impact on our breastfeeding journey due to the difficulties with feeding whilst my baby had a tongue tie. I feel this may have been different if there wasn’t such a long delay and worry that if I hadn’t spoken with the breastfeeding team how much longer we would have gone on struggling. I mentioned this to every midwife / staff member that came to visit us in the home in the first few weeks as we had lots of visits due to concern my baby had jaundice but no one followed up where our referral was even when they said they would.”***

James Paget University Hospitals

## Other themes and references

### Waiting in services (9 mentions)

Comments within this theme included experiences from a range of different settings (e.g., waiting in clinics, accessing GP appointments and waiting for treatment/care). Of the nine reviews that referenced 'waiting', one was positive, four were mixed, and four were negative.

For some, delays and long waits in services were acknowledged as inevitable, but good communication, treatment and positive staff attitudes went a long way towards easing any negative feelings.

*"I'm very happy with the support provided by the brilliant staff. Sometimes the waits are quite long, but that can't be helped really, and I now bring a book, snack, and drink. Staff have also said on arrival when the delays have been on the longer side."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"I was referred through to gynaecology from another department in the hospital. Everything has been explained well by the doctors and nurses. It can be hard keeping the children entertained while waiting, which can be quit' a while but I've been very happy with the care and the labour ward was good too."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"I'm having regular visits to the department at the moment and have been well supported. Staff have explained that there may well be waits to be seen but they are lovely and me feel comfortable."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"It's been very busy today and there has been a long wait to be seen but it's not normally like this. The support provided has been amazing and they always do their best, it's not lacking in any way as the staff are great."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

### Digital support (11 mentions)

It is encouraging that of the 11 comments made about digital access, most (nine) were positive in sentiment. People valued the speed of response they received through online services, the ability to share information with their healthcare professionals, and the facility to view appointments in one place.

*"Ipswich midwives are paper based but I can share information with them through the portal and that works fine."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"Been offered good support and get quick responses using the online service, and whenever I call or email I get quick responses."* – **Community Midwives**

*"My experience of attending maternity appointments has been very good. Appointments have been arranged as and when needed and the staff have been lovely. I've felt well listened to and given lots of information and I like that I can see all appointment information on the app."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"Having online access for the appointments is much better and easier."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"I attended the antenatal clinic for our first scan and all contact with the staff was really good. Everyone has been so lovely and friendly and explained every step. The portal is nice and simple to set up and use and my community midwife was brilliant."* – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

Two respondents had been concerned about the speed and functionality of digital solutions. One comment highlighted the need for appropriate alternative solutions and for patients to be offered choice.

*"I think the only thing I would mention is that the online NHS portal which has my notes and leaflets on is not that quick to use and if needed in a hurry it would be*



difficult to access especially if my husband needed to find something, 5 years ago I had a physical book with this information in and I would have preferred to have had the option to have had a proper book again.” – **Community Midwives**

“It’s a brilliant department and the staff are friendly and helpful at difficult times and they deal with queries well. I have had issues with the app as it doesn’t seem to update so I’ve given up using it.” – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

## Continuity of care (11 mentions)

Previous reports have highlighted the importance of continuity of care in creating a positive experience for new and expectant mothers. It is, therefore, encouraging that eight of the 11 comments made about continuity of care were positive in sentiment. One respondent made specific mention of the improvements she had noticed since her previous experience, two years ago.

“Consultant-led care due to various health conditions. Saw same consultant we had for previous pregnancy, so I personally feel we had exceptional continuity of care as she had already safely guided me through one pregnancy and delivery and so knew all about my case and what I needed to have a safe and healthy pregnancy. It was lovely that she was able to deliver both my children.” – **East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust**

“I saw the same midwife for each appointment and received really good care. All appointments were arranged well and I had lots of extra appointments to monitor my baby’s growth and everything at all points was well explained.” – **Community Midwives**

“I had one midwife throughout my labour and was well supported after the birth with feeding my daughter as she struggled to latch on well but the staff were great and I was very grateful for the support.” – **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

## Suffolk Foundation Trust

“After having my previous child a couple of years ago and this one a few months ago, I was able to see the difference in the continuity of care teams. It was excellent and made such a difference to me.” – **James Paget University Hospitals**

Three comments highlighted the negative impact a disruption in care can have on a mother’s mental health and wellbeing.

“My midwife went off sick late in my pregnancy and then I met a different midwife every week, around 6. This is really hard around the time of birth as you often feel more vulnerable, especially when being offered sweeps and checks from someone you’ve never met before and in the immediate few days post birth when hormones are difficult. The care was mostly OK.” – **Community Midwives**

“I feel that having the same midwife would provide consistency in the pregnancy journey. I was able to build a rapport with one professional and felt more comfortable discussing more personal aspect of my journey. Having seen different professionals in the last few weeks had an impact on my mental health, it was frustrating having to explain my history and lifestyle, I also felt less empathy with the different health professionals. Post birth was similar seeing 5 different health professionals over a short amount of time meant I was having to repeat my history, circumstances and birth experience.”

“After having numerous midwife’s not even sure who my main was in the end. The last midwife we had was amazing so friendly and easy to talk to and answered any concerns we had. We actually looked forward to our midwife appointments after dreading them for ages.” – **Community Midwives**

One respondent felt so strongly about the need for continuity of care that she had

decided to pay privately for a midwife to support her through her pregnancy.

*“Five years ago at the WS hospital I had my first baby and it was an horrendous experience, I wasn’t listened to by the maternity staff when I was in need after my waters had broken. It has taken me five years to decide to do it again but I am hesitant. I think having the consistency of the same midwife all the way through is important to a mother to build trust... I have paid privately for a midwife to be with me as an extra support this time which I know not everyone could afford but I need that extra reassurance.” – West Suffolk Foundation Trust*

### Mental health and wellbeing (10 mentions)

Ten people commented about support for mental health and wellbeing. Five of these comments were positive and five were negative. Feedback included:

*“I feel that having the same midwife would provide consistency in the pregnancy journey. I was able to build a rapport with one professional and felt more comfortable discussing more personal aspect of my journey. Having seen different professionals in the last few weeks had an impact on my mental health, it was frustrating having to explain my history and lifestyle, I also felt less empathy with the different health professionals. Post birth was similar seeing 5 different health professionals over a short amount of time meant I was having to repeat my history, circumstances and birth experience. The birthing experience was positive at the hospital, was a struggle to spend the first night without my husband and took a fair time to discharge me. I did have to make several calls and emails to the infant feeding team for breastfeeding support, I feel that the community midwives/health visiting team could make more “check in*

*calls” especially when there is a history of anxiety.”*

*“Told we were overreacting when we were trying t’ plan for all eventualities and they didn’t seem interested in safety planning. The language staff used was not neutral and they didn’t choose their language well and every issues raised during the pregnancy was put down to my mental health.” – Suffolk Perinatal Mental Health Service*

*“My notes also always had a tick about my mental health but I never was specifically asked about my mental health, so I’ve never mentioned my anxiety about my upcoming section or fear that the baby won’t survive.” – Community Midwives*

*“The team regularly check how I’m feeling and how my mental health is, I really can’t fault anything.” – West Suffolk Foundation Trust*

*“I would say too that the mental health support was really good too, as the last experience was difficult due to COVID and lack of support from family being allowed, and it being my first. So, I was nervous, but they were brilliant.” – James Paget University Hospitals*

*“It has taken a long time to actually get seen by the team and I’ve had to push to get support and for anything to be done.” – Suffolk Perinatal Mental Health Service*

*“I was very emotional over my three day stay and felt very depressed, anxious and at times suicidal and I don’t feel many of the midwives understood how to support me, I felt like a burden and I didn’t know how to ask for support and my husband was sent home. I think had my husband of been able to stay with me, especially as I was in a side room I wouldn’t have the post natal anxiety that I do now that needs to be medicated.” – East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust*

## Birth partner (10 mentions)

The important role birth partners provide during labour are well evidenced and recognised. The crucial role partners have in providing support and advocacy for the mother, however, does not end once the baby is born. For some (particularly those who have experienced a difficult or traumatic labour, or heightened anxiety or mental health issues), having the support of a partner during the first hours after birth can be critical to their wellbeing.

Six of the 10 comments concerning birth partners highlighted an impact on wellbeing because partners had been denied the opportunity to stay after childbirth.

*"I have felt in good and safe hands with the midwives and looked after. When my baby was born it was in the evening and my husband was allowed to stay for about an hour afterwards but then the staff on the ward were adamant that he had to leave, I really wanted him to stay, and so did he, but he wasn't allowed, this caused me not to sleep and I was very angry and upset, I know that I would have felt so much better if he had been allowed to stay."* - **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"I had a c-section. If partners were allowed to stay overnight/after they could care for me and the baby with basic needs to save already overrun midwives. I had a catheter all night and so had to rely on midwives to do everything and felt so guilty calling them to change my baby when my partner and the babies dad could have so easily done this if allowed to stay"* - **East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust**

*"The birthing experience was positive at the hospital, was a struggle to spend the first night without my husband....."*

*"...I was very emotional over my three day stay and felt very depressed, anxious and at times suicidal and I don't feel many of the midwives understood how to support*

*me, I felt like a burden and I didn't know how to ask for support and my husband was sent home. I think had my husband of been able to stay with me, especially as I was in a side room I wouldn't have the post natal anxiety that I do now that needs to be medicated... Had my husband have been able to be by my side through the whole experience I think I would have coped a lot better, I am six months post birth and still dealing with the repercussions of my birth. I really think husbands should be allowed to stay on the ward with new mums. Especially if they are in side rooms. No new mum should be left by herself, in pain, stitched up, with a brand new baby. There needs to be more support and if there aren't enough midwives to provide that support the mother should be allowed to bring her own support system to stay with her."* - **East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust**

*"I was also not told my husband couldn't stay on the ward with me and he was instructed to leave abruptly and felt overwhelmed to have to care for my baby by myself. Again the next day I was just left for hours and had to constantly chase staff to find out what was happening."* - **East Suffolk and North Essex NHS Foundation Trust**

Three further respondents expressed a wish that provision was made to enable partners to stay after the birth, and in one case the birth partner had been allowed to stay.

*"Great to hear the news that from April partners will be able to stay overnight, just a shame I'll miss out on this by just over a week, it would've been lovely to have that option."* - **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

*"I found there was limited support. I was not aware that there was a reflections service to help with difficult births and the breast feeding support and information about what support is available more widely was limited. I had an induction followed by an emergency c section and*

my partner was sent home very soon after the birth because he was told he was a risk even though we were in a private side room so I didn't have the best of experiences on the ward." - **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

"My partner being able to stay overnight once my baby was born [could have improved my experience]" - **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

"I received very good care during a very complicated pregnancy and when I was admitted my partner was able to stay too. We were very pleased with the care and support provided." - **West Suffolk Foundation Trust**

***“I had a c-section. If partners were allowed to stay overnight or later they could care for me and the baby with basic needs to save already overrun midwives. I had a catheter all night and so had to rely on midwives to do everything and felt so guilty calling them to change my baby when my partner and the babies dad could have so easily done this if allowed to stay”***

East Suffolk and North Essex Foundation Trust



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## **Contact us**

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