



*Protecting human rights
in childbirth*

Registered address:
Birthrights
Union House
111 New Union Street
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0300 400 30 400

20th August 2020

Dear Jacqui, Matthew, and Stephen

I am writing to you on behalf of Birthrights to ask NHS England to issue guidance to Trusts in England to relax visiting restrictions in maternity services, unless there are compelling local reasons not to.

Pregnant individuals currently face a lottery over the visiting restrictions imposed by local maternity services. We understand that decisions need to take account of local circumstances and also need to protect staff. However we do not believe the current variation can be accounted for by objective differences in local coronavirus cases, estates, or staff profiles. We believe a well-intentioned but varied appetite for risk is at play, which differs from Trust to Trust and from Local Maternity System to Local Maternity System. This variance is rarely fully explained and therefore cannot effectively be held to account.

Pregnant women and birthing people contacting us are losing patience with the low priority placed on their needs. Ostensibly the same Government social distancing guidelines apply to all and yet people can go to shops, pubs, beauty salons and casinos but can't bring a companion to an antenatal appointment. Thirty people are allowed to attend a wedding reception and yet in many areas of the country, during another of life's most significant events, a single partner is not allowed to be present for a critical scan, for induction or for more than a couple of hours after witnessing their own baby being born. If different rules should apply to NHS settings, then this case needs to be publicly made.

The current situation cannot become the "new normal". We are deeply concerned that the work of the Maternity Transformation Programme to put women at the centre of their care, has not just been put on hold, but may be seeping away at an alarming rate. Restricting visiting around the time of pregnancy and birth, is a

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significant interference with the rights of both parents, and the distinct needs of the pregnant population should be properly acknowledged. There is already emerging evidence of the damage the pandemic has wreaked on new families in terms of increased mental health issues and trauma. The risk is that the longer term damage from these measures may eclipse the damage from coronavirus itself.

Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all directed their healthcare providers to lift restrictions to recognise that essential supportive role of partners. It is time to do the same for pregnant women in England. We would like to see national guidance, which urges Trusts to treat pregnant people and one named partner as a single unit and to lift restrictions on partners being present:

- At scans
- At antenatal appointments
- At induction of labour
- During triage in labour
- On antenatal wards
- On postnatal wards
- And on neonatal units

A second birth partner should also be accommodated where possible.

Trusts should be encouraged to implement this proposed guidance unless they can give compelling reasons why they are an exceptional case, and should keep the areas of their service where the guidance is not implemented to an absolute minimum. We would also like to see implementation of the guidance monitored at national level. Finally, we would like to see funding made available to maternity units to make the changes to estates which will help Trusts to accommodate partners and visitors in a socially distanced way.

We recognise that it is possible that restrictions on visiting in maternity services may need to be tightened in some local areas in the coming months. However we believe it is essential that women-centred care, that recognises the unique circumstances of pregnancy, and the critical role of companionship and support

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during this time, is re-established as the “norm” that should be returned to as quickly as possible whenever restrictions are temporarily imposed.

We look forward to your urgent response.

Best regards,

Maria Booker
Programmes Director - Birthrights

Cc Baroness Cumberlege
RCOG/RCM COVID guidance cell
Stella Creasy MP