



GIVING BIRTH AT HOME?

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From the early 1960s the most usual place to give birth moved from being a woman's home to a hospital setting. Today less than 1 per cent of births in Northern Ireland take place at home, but new advice, from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), could lead to a shift

away from hospital births.

Under the new guidance, women at a greater risk of complications will still be told that hospital may be a safer option, and all first-time mothers will be advised that a home birth carries a slightly higher risk of complications for the baby.

"Women should be offered a choice of place of birth, taking account of individual needs, risks and circumstances."

A Northern Ireland Strategy for Nursing and Midwifery, 2010 – 2015

For non high risk women a birth in either the home or a midwife-led unit are thought to be equally safe options.

Ultimately there is no "one-size fits all" model of childbirth that would suit all women, with some women preferring to give birth at home and others feeling 'safer' being located in a hospital with interventions close by if required.

At the heart of the NICE recommendations is that women should feel free to choose any birth setting available to them and be supported in their choice. This is also supported by the latest Strategy for Nursing and Midwifery in Northern Ireland.

A move towards home births comes with obvious financial benefits; the more women that deliver outside a hospital the less expensive maternity services become. You save on hospital beds and the cost of neonatal services. Latest figures indicate there are 1,440 midwives employed in Northern Ireland, but experts say more midwives will be needed to guarantee that women are able to access all the birth options that NICE recommend should be available to them.

What's Happening in Northern Ireland?

Since 2003, the number of births in the home, while low, has more than doubled in Northern Ireland. Over the period 2009 to 2013, 436 (0.3 percent of all births) births took place in the mother's home. Figure 1 shows the location of these births in relation to hospitals in Northern Ireland.

While the majority of births took place near hospitals, almost 20 per cent took place more than 15 miles from the nearest hospital. These births also included first time mothers. Whatever the reason for more women electing to give birth at home, if this trend continues, the face of maternity services in Northern Ireland could be set for change.

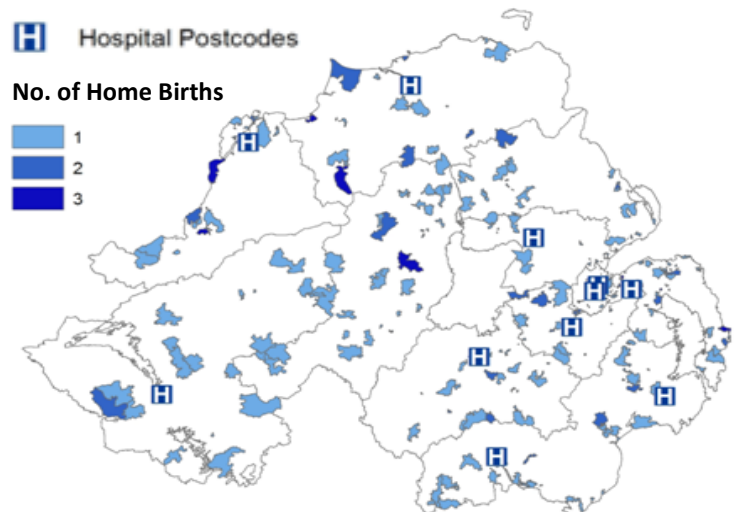


Figure 1: Location of Home Births, 2009-2013

Low Risk Mothers

'Low risk' is defined as mothers, aged under 35, having their second or subsequent child. It does not take into account known complications with the pregnancy. Between 2009 and 2013 approximately two in five births in hospitals fell into this category.

Under the new guidelines these mothers should consider a home birth, assuming there are no known complications. Perhaps some women don't realise a home birth is an option available to them, or some perceive hospital as a safer setting, with assistance on hand from obstetricians and anaesthetists and access to specialist baby care units if required.

Distance to hospital may perhaps be a major factor in their decision. More than 40 per cent of 'low risk' mothers giving birth in hospital between 2009 and 2013 lived less than 5 miles from their nearest maternity hospital. If these mothers had elected to give birth at home this would have had a major impact on how the health service here currently delivers maternity services.

Making Informed Decisions

Women can make an informed decision about where they plan to give birth. Many factors will influence this decision including the range of services available in their area, proximity to the nearest hospital, ambulance response times, their age, previous experiences and what their friends and family tell them. Data produced by NISRA (Figure 2) provides maternity information in local hospitals to help mothers in this decision.

Drugs available at home births, may also be a consideration for many, although home birth mothers are more likely to want a natural labour (ie no drugs or interventions at all). Drugs available will vary according to where you live. They include Entonox ('gas and air' - a mixture of Nitrous Oxide, or laughing gas, and Oxygen), and Pethidine.

Women considering a home birth should speak to their midwife and gain further information on their options.

Further information on births in Northern Ireland is available on the NISRA website at <http://www.nisra.gov.uk/demography/default.asp8.htm>

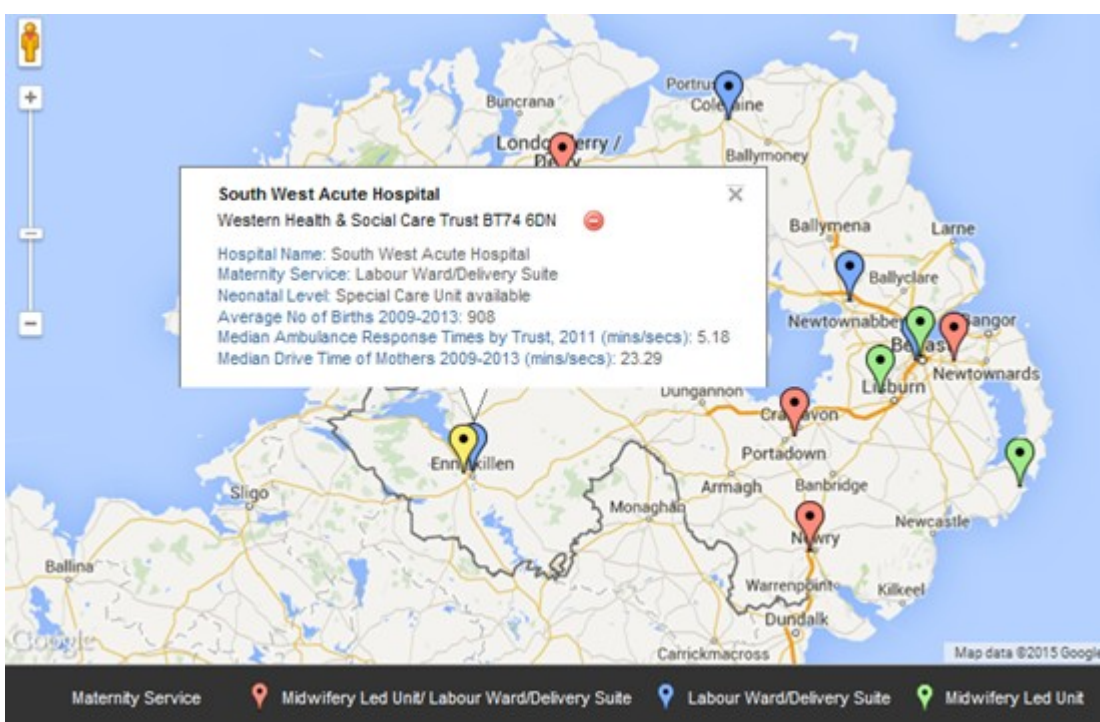


Figure 2:
Key Stats per Hospital

*Click on map to
access interactive
map*