

PRESS RELEASE – 30th November 2017

Temporary suspension at South Tyneside special care baby unit

South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust has today confirmed a temporary suspension of the special care baby unit (SCBU) service at South Tyneside District Hospital due to significant and ongoing staffing pressures.

Due to shortages of specialist qualified staff, healthcare leaders have made an important safety decision to temporarily suspend the SCBU service until the New Year to ensure the continued safety and wellbeing of newborn babies who require special care.

Despite ongoing efforts to maintain safe staffing levels, critical rota gaps have proved difficult to fill which have left the service increasingly fragile. The temporary suspension of services will take place with immediate effect with a review of the staffing position in January 2018.

NHS staff within the special care baby unit, who have been working heroic amounts of additional hours to keep services running safely, are aware of the temporary decision and will be redeployed into maternity services to support the delivery of care to mums and babies in the hospital.

Due to the temporary suspension of SCBU during December, the hospital's maternity unit in South Tyneside will only be able to accommodate low risk deliveries and the Trust will be working with women affected to ensure alternative safe alternative arrangements are made.

The Trust is in dialogue with the regional neonatal network, neighbouring special care baby units, maternity services and the North East Ambulance Service to discuss the impact of these urgent but necessary safety measures.

Dr Shahid Wahid, Medical Director at South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust said: “The safety and wellbeing of women and newborn babies in our care must always come first and we have taken this very difficult decision in the very best interests of patient care. There are many vital quality and safety standards that we simply must comply with and the ongoing pressures on our workforce have reached a critical tipping point this week.

“I would like to thank our staff within the special care baby unit who have worked tirelessly over several months to keep services running safely. The health and wellbeing of our team is of equal concern to us and we will be providing support for our staff in the weeks ahead and as we review the staffing position in January.

"We will also be in urgent contact with those women and families whose pregnancies are classed as 'high risk' and who are booked into the maternity unit to deliver in December to make safe alternative arrangements for this very important and personal occasion.

"Over the past year we have been very clear about the significant workforce challenges facing some of our most vulnerable services at South Tyneside District Hospital, including maternity and paediatric care and today's temporary decision highlights the very real and significant pressures that our teams have been coping with on a daily basis."

The special care baby unit at South Tyneside District Hospital is a Level 1 unit providing special care and does not undertake continuing high dependency or intensive care. Although the unit has six cots, the Trust has already had to limit admissions to the department in order to comply with strict safe staffing rules. Over the last few months the special care baby unit has consistently been unable to open more than four cots due to ongoing staffing pressures.

The long-term future of the special care baby unit at South Tyneside District Hospital has recently been consulted on as part of phase one of the Path to Excellence programme which has considered options for three service areas, including maternity. The formal public consultation for this concluded on 15 October 2017 and a decision about the long-term future is expected from NHS South Tyneside CCG and NHS Sunderland CCG in February 2018.

ENDS

Media contact: Liz Davies, Head of Communications 07771943066