

Press release – Thursday 14 December 2017

Trust reassures public following temporary suspension of births

Leaders at South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust have today confirmed that all of the women affected by the temporary suspension of births at South Tyneside District Hospital have now been contacted by maternity staff to discuss individual care plans.

In total, 163 women have been contacted who were due to give birth at the hospital up until 14 January 2018 with 17 of these ladies having already safely delivered their babies in other neighbouring units. Initial analysis of where the remaining women have chosen for their deliveries shows:

- 35% of women choosing the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Gateshead
- 33% of women choosing the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle
- 31% of women choosing Sunderland Royal Hospital
- 1% of women choosing a home birth.

There are 46 women who remain undecided about where they would like to give birth and local maternity staff in South Tyneside are continuing to liaise closely with these families to ensure appropriate care plans are put in place. The Trust is keen to reassure women that all local antenatal clinics, fetal scanning and community midwifery services are running in South Tyneside.

Since the temporary suspension of births, the Trust has been working closely with consultants, midwives and nursing staff who are all continuing to work locally from their usual hospital or community base in South Tyneside.

Discussions remain focussed on looking at all possible options, including any ideas put forward by maternity unit staff, as to how the Trust may be able to safely staff its Special Care Baby Unit with nurses who have the required neonatal experience, training and qualifications.

A further round of recruitment is currently underway for neonatal nursing and the Trust is also discussing what work needs to take place to enable low risk deliveries to safely take

place as soon as possible in South Tyneside, should the acute staffing challenges in the Special Care Baby Unit continue into the New Year.

As yet, there is no clear timeline as to when the Special Care Baby Unit is likely to reopen and the Trust is very keen to stress that it is doing all it can to make this happen as soon as possible. This work is ongoing and an update will be provided in early January as to the likely next steps.

Last Thursday (7 December) the Trust met with the Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee and has this week (11 December) met with the South Tyneside Labour Group to explain the situation, why it was deemed unsafe to continue delivering babies without specialist neonatal expertise being readily available and to describe the overall fragility of the Special Care Baby Unit in South Tyneside over many years.

Chief Executive Ken Bremner has responded to a number of questions from local MP Emma Lewell-Buck and invited her for a face-to-face meeting to discuss this very challenging position for the Trust and explain why these urgent safety measures were absolutely necessary and in the very best interests of patients and staff.

Over 40% of the current 11 strong neonatal team in South Tyneside are currently unavailable to staff the unit due to a number of personal circumstances which are out with the Trust's control. This has left multiple rota gaps throughout December, which the Trust has been unable to fill despite extensive efforts. This included a call for help across the region's entire neonatal network, however, there was simply no extra workforce capacity available to support South Tyneside.

Dr Sean Fenwick, Director of Operations at South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust said: "I would like to thank our patients, staff and neighbouring maternity units for their understanding and support during this very challenging situation. The safety of mothers and babies in our care must always come first and we hope people understand why we had to put a temporary halt to births while we try to solve the staffing challenges we face in neonatal care.

"Our priority is to continue working with our teams to look at all possible solutions as to how we can get back to safely delivering babies at South Tyneside Hospital. We are very clear, however, that we will only re-open our Special Care Baby Unit if and when we can clearly

demonstrate, to our Trust Board and our independent regulators, that we are able to consistently meet required safe staffing standards for neonatal care.”

Dr Shahid Wahid, Medical Director at South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust said:

“The decision to temporarily suspend births was not taken lightly or in isolation by the Trust and there was a strongly agreed and independent clinical view across the region that the safest option for South Tyneside mums and babies was to temporarily pause births at the hospital.

“Given the staffing challenges we face in our Special Care Baby Unit, we were simply not willing to accept the level of clinical risk for babies to be born without any specialist neonatal care readily available in South Tyneside to support resuscitation and stabilisation.

“I really hope people can appreciate that the safety of our mothers and babies is paramount and this continues to be at the heart of current discussions taking place as we work towards potential solutions.”

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Media contact: Liz Davies, Head of Communications 07771943066 liz.davies@chsft.nhs.uk

Important information for pregnant women:

Our midwife-led telephone advice service in South Tyneside continues to be available 24/7 on 0191 2024190. In addition, pregnant women can also call directly the maternity service at Sunderland Royal Hospital on 0191 5699777 if they need urgent advice. This number is the delivery suite and is available 24/7.