



## Putting mothers first

*Wirral University Teaching Hospital has won an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Maternity (APPGM) award for its work in involving women in local maternity services. Catherine Kelly, health patient matron, talked to Kim Thomas about the work that won the award.*

In 2007, Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust began an extensive consultation with women about the improvements they'd like to see in local maternity services. The decision to carry out the consultation came about partly in response to points for improvement outlined in the Healthcare Commission's 2007 review of maternity services, and partly by the desire to implement *Maternity Matters*.

The trust came up with 21 questions about maternity services, which it put to women in children's centres and other community venues in Wirral, such as mums and tots groups, postnatal groups, a breastfeeding group, a church and a toy library. The sessions were well-attended, and women were able to write answers on post-it notes, or to ask other people to write the answers down for them.

The two most common themes to emerge from the consultation, says Catherine Kelly, health patient matron for Wirral University Teaching Hospital, were a desire for greater continuity of care and for individual rooms, rather than wards, after giving birth.

A new maternity unit was designed with funding from the primary care trust (PCT). Women in the existing unit were consulted on the décor and layout. The refurbishment of the new unit, which includes three birthing pool rooms and 26 ensuite single rooms, was completed in 2010. There is also a six-bed bay for immediate postoperative care and a bereavement suite. The new environment is 'much more pleasant', says Kelly: 'Midwives feel a lot more valued having a lovely new building to work in. It's a lot tidier, which takes the stress out of people finding things. We feel like we're able to give the women the services they want, with the pool rooms and the privacy and dignity in the ensuite rooms.'

Women have been very happy with the new unit, says Kelly, and the introduction of spacious single rooms has enabled fathers to stay overnight – something that had previously been difficult to arrange: 'The requests for dads to stay were increasing and we couldn't do that in the six-bedded bays.' A small number of women, however, say they find the private rooms a little lonely and miss the six-bed bays. The midwives try to counter that by encouraging women to attend preparation for parenthood classes, where they can make new friendships with other mothers.

The pools have been well-used – in the old unit, there hadn't been enough pools to meet demand. Since the appointment of a midwife to promote the principles of normal childbirth, midwives have worked hard to keep births as normal as possible, encouraging women to use sitting and squatting positions rather than lying positions to give birth. To reduce the caesarean rate, which, says Kelly, was 'spiralling out of control', the unit has ended its policy of automatically inducing babies that are a week overdue, enabling more women to go into labour naturally. The unit has also introduced a VBAC clinic to give more women the opportunity to opt for a vaginal birth. The changes have had an impact: between the start of 2008 and the start of 2011, the caesarean rate dropped from 23% to 20%.

After giving birth, women can now, if they wish, leave after a couple of hours, and have the first paediatric exam at home. 'We get very positive feedback from that,' says Kelly. 'They've got the best of both worlds – security of the birth in hospital, and they're back with the family at the soonest opportunity.'

As well as improving the environment in which women give birth, the trust has widened the number of places where women can gain access to antenatal care. Women can now have appointments in the evenings or on Saturday mornings, and there is also a daytime mums-and-midwives 'drop-in' shop, where women can have an antenatal check, including a blood test, and have benefit forms signed. This has been a boon, says Kelly: 'Women are really delighted that they don't have to take time off – some were feeling quite pressured by their own employers not to take time off, even though we tell them that they are fully within their rights to have that time.' The percentage of patients who have booked in by 12 weeks has risen from 73% at the start of 2008 to 90% at the beginning of 2011.

The trust's recent CQC report showed a big improvement in the patients' experience of the service compared with three years earlier, says Kelly, but the unit continues to solicit feedback from users: 'We're a unit that doesn't sit still – we're constantly reviewing our services and how we can improve at every point.'