
**Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee
7 March 2022**

**Report from NHS England Specialised Commissioning South East
Proposed changes to neonatal services at St. Richard's Hospital
University Hospital Sussex NHS Foundation Trust**

Summary

NHS England is proposing to make the St. Richard's neonatal service a Special Care Unit (SCU) rather than remain as a Local Neonatal Unit (LNU) to more accurately reflect the needs of most babies that require care there.

St Richards does not care for enough very small or very sick babies to give the staff enough exposure to give the best care to these babies. The trend for the number of births and the number of very small babies born who needs care at St Richard's is downward. The changes would bring the neonatal service at St. Richard's in line with national guidelines.

Making St. Richard's unit a SCU means that some low birthweight and sick babies will now be cared for in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Portsmouth Hospitals University Hospitals Trust which already provides a service for the very smallest and sickest babies from St. Richard's.

The change will ensure the sustainability of the service at St Richards. In recent years changes along these lines have been successfully undertaken elsewhere in the South East region.

Background

Within the NHS there are different levels of care for babies dependent on their needs. There are three levels of neonatal care:

Special Care Unit (SCU)

SCU is for babies who need short term care such as continuous monitoring of their breathing and heart rate, treatment for jaundice and for those who are convalescing from other care. Generally premature babies who are over 32 weeks gestation will be cared for in a SCU.

Local Neonatal Unit (LNU)

LNU is for babies who have a higher dependency and need short term intensive care. Generally premature babies who are over 27 weeks gestation will be cared for in a LNU. The unit at St. Richard's Hospital is a LNU.

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU)

NICU provides very specialist intensive treatment for the very smallest and sickest babies. Generally, babies who are less than 27 weeks gestation will be cared for in a NICU.

Last year seven pregnant women from Western Sussex travelled to Portsmouth to deliver their baby in a hospital which has a NICU because these babies needed the highest levels of care.

Neonatal services are planned by NHS England South East based on local needs. The service is specialised and is provided through a network of hospitals with clinicians working together across the region.

NHS England has undertaken a national review of all Neonatal Units following recommendations in [Better Births, A Five Year Forward View of Maternity Services](#) and published a [Neonatal Critical Care Transformation Review](#).

The review shows the Local Neonatal Unit at St. Richard's Hospital provides care for the lowest number of babies in the South East in a year and is amongst the lowest in England compared with other LNU. In a year the unit cares for an average of nine babies born at less than 32 weeks.

The advice of expert doctors from the British Association of Perinatal Medicine is that staff need a regular caseload of babies to ensure they maintain their skills and expertise.

Reason for scrutiny

NHS England proposes to engage with families about the proposals to change the service as set out in the Communications and Engagement Strategy.