UKMidSS
UK Midwifery Study System

NIHR | Policy Research Unit
Maternal and Neonatal Health and Care

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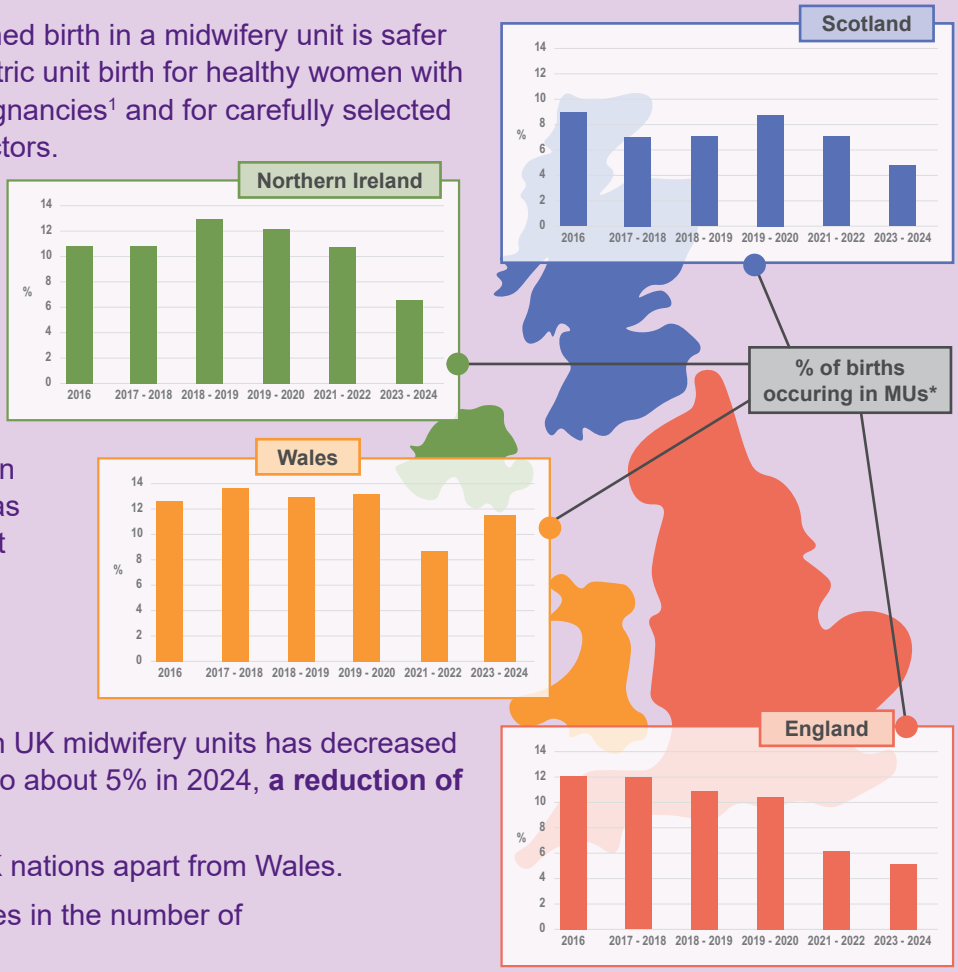
Changing patterns of place of birth 2016-2024

Why are midwifery units important and what does our research add?

- We know that planned birth in a midwifery unit is safer than planned obstetric unit birth for healthy women with straightforward pregnancies[1] and for carefully selected women with risk factors.
- We know that planned midwifery unit birth is equally as safe as planned obstetric unit birth for babies born to healthy women with straightforward pregnancies[1] and for carefully selected women with risk factors.
- We found that the number of women giving birth in UK midwifery units has fallen dramatically since 2016, most significantly since 2021.



What did our study find?

- The proportion of births in UK midwifery units has decreased from about 12% in 2016 to about 5% in 2024, **a reduction of over 50%.**
- This pattern was observed in all UK nations apart from Wales.
- This is not explained by any changes in the number of midwifery units.

What does NICE guidance say?

- Women at low risk of complications should have a choice about where they plan to give birth[2].
- For women with medical conditions and other potential risk factors, their risks and care should be discussed so that they can make an informed choice about planned place of birth.
- Available birth options should include: homebirth, alongside midwifery units, freestanding midwifery units and obstetric units.

Policy questions

- How can we make sure that midwifery units are **offered** to ensure women have choice of a range of safe options for birth?
- How can we make sure that midwifery led units are **used** to ensure women have choice of a range of safe options for birth?
- How can we best support midwives to maintain (and student midwives to gain) sufficient experience and skills to support women with straightforward vaginal birth?

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