

BIRTHPLACE MATTERS

Second Edition – November 2014



A renewed plea to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Norfolk to

.... permanently and wholly reinstate its homebirth
service for women

.... learn from the example of other Trusts, where
homebirth is valued as a positive, thriving part of the
midwifery services

.... acknowledge and take more seriously the strength
of women's feelings regarding the place they give birth
to their babies

*This document and all the comments herein, except for the WHO quote, was compiled by Paula
Cleary, from September-November 2014, and permission was sought for all quotes.*

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Introduction

If you are reading Birthplace Matters for the first time, welcome. For those who have read the first edition, welcome back.

This updated and extended edition contains the original letter I wrote to the Homebirth Policy-Makers at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Norfolk, regarding the removal of homebirth services for women in its catchment area and the many responses my letter evoked from figures in the birth world, as well as stories from mothers, fathers and others who were affected by the withdrawal, or angered by it in principal.

Following the dissemination of Birthplace Matters I continued to receive messages from women who wanted to add their own experiences to be documented and heard by all and they are contained herein. Their voices deserve to be heard. One in particular, has haunted me ever since – the story of a woman so traumatised by her experiences of hospital birth at QEH that she is now scared to have any more children. This is a very sad state of affairs, to say the least.

Along with these brave women, I am also grateful to world-renowned Active Birth Founder, Janet Balaskas for adding a passionate and sensible explanation of why homebirth matters for this second edition, and for the wisdom of Beverley Beech from AIMS, (Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services) who has also contributed. If anyone is in any doubt as to the safety and financial viability of homebirth provision, Beverley has written a Summary of the Homebirth Study from 2011, which is on page 80, which ought to lay these myths to rest once and for all that homebirth is both more expensive and less safe than hospital birth.

On the back of the outpouring of emotion that was evoked in Birthplace Matters, I took to the streets of Kings Lynn one sunny Saturday in October this year, with a number of local mothers and families, to speak with the public about the removal of the Homebirth Service at the QEH, and tell them about Birthplace Matters. We were overwhelmed with the public's sympathy and support.

Walking with a petition and some placards, we talked to a broad mix of people. Some had birthed their babies at home and were incensed at the lack of choice. Some had birthed their babies in a hospital and were angry that others should have the choice denied them.

Interestingly, two separate members of staff who work at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital walked over to give me a 'thumbs up' and said they would love to sign our petition but were frightened they might be made redundant for putting their name to it, one of them remarking "because that's what they're like at that place".

I was also surprised when a senior midwife from another local hospital signed our petition, agreeing that it was a great loss for all concerned.

Even people who were not remotely interested in having a homebirth for themselves were sympathetic to the fact that it should be available for free, to any woman who wants to choose it for herself and her baby.

At the time of writing, the petition is simultaneously being circulated and collected from various sites around Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, and will be copied in full with all the comments therein, and added to a third edition of Birthplace Matters at the end of the year.

I will repeat it again and again until the message is heard: Birth place truly matters now more than ever, if we are to preserve the skills that midwives have traditionally retained. Whilst it may bring relief financially in the very short-term for the unit to have suspended its service, the kind of care that happens in hospital-only midwifery as is now the case in Queen Elizabeth Hospital is serving neither the midwives there, nor the women in their care in the longer term.

I will continue to fight for local women until a homebirth service with midwives in attendance is fully reinstated for those who would wish for that, and question the 1% homebirth uptake that was quoted to me by Stephanie Pease, the Supervisor of Midwives at the QEH. This percentage indicates a worrying trend which is out of step with other counties, and even with Norfolk's 3-4% homebirth rates from as recently as 2007.

The idea of homebirth as a minority, fringe-option for a select few earth mothers, or some kind of indulgent or expensive luxury which compromises other mothers and puts them at risk, is a convenient excuse for not providing the service and is no fault of mothers who wish to have their babies at home. This attitude has got to be rooted out and seen for what it is – a distraction from the truth of the matter, which is that the financial handling or mishandling of QEH budgets is not the fault or concern of service users, but their own problem to solve.

It is my dearest wish that this Second Edition further proves that what at first appeared to be a local or regional issue, is actually of national, and international concern. It gives me hope that people are rallying together on this cause and I hope that Birthplace Matters is read, shared, and discussed, continuing to have a ripple effect, sparking debate and action on a wider platform, so the importance of birthplace is not lost to short-sighted, short-term policies.

I hope that a long-term solution to this issue is brought about immediately for this and future generations of women and their families.

Paula Cleary,

November, 2014



Birthplace Matters to siblings too!

*Quote from World Health Organization "Having a Baby in Europe",
European Regional Office, 1985*

"By medicalizing birth, i.e. separating a woman from her own environment and surrounding her with strange people using strange machines to do strange things to her in an effort to assist her, the woman's state of mind and body is so altered that her way of carrying through this intimate act must also be altered and the state of the baby born must equally be altered.

The result is that it is no longer possible to know what births would have been like before these manipulations.

Most health care providers no longer know what 'non-medicalized' birth is. The entire modern obstetric and neonatological literature is essentially based on observations of 'medicalized' birth."

How sad that this still remains true after almost 30 years. When will we learn?

This document contains the voices of REAL parents in West Norfolk and those of

Birth Activists,

NHS and Independent midwives

Birth Trauma Counsellors

NCT Volunteers

Doulas...

and many supportive, articulate, intelligent and passionate parents from across the UK and beyond, who read the following letter.

These comments were made personally and directly to me, in response to my letter. They are not generic comments on homebirth from the internet or otherwise, and are printed with full permission.

It has taken great courage for some of these women to speak out and share their stories. A woman never forgets her babies' births, they will either comfort or haunt her for a long time. I urge you to read every word of this document if you wish to really learn something about women and birth.

Every single one of these voices comes from real people. People you serve. People who are talking about your hospital, in public forums. Together, they say volumes – so much more than one little letter on its own. I hope that the relevant people sit up and take notice of what is being expressed here.... a message... that we should value, protect and ACTIVELY encourage homebirth services for ALL women and offer a truly woman-centred approach to their care, right here in Norfolk, and in fact, everywhere.

I am truly grateful and honoured to have heard and documented their stories, and I share them with you, in the hope that you learn something valuable from them.

Paula Cleary's open letter to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital

“Dear Homebirth Policy-Makers

It has taken six months to be able to write this letter because until now I have felt too angry to write coherently. I feel compelled to add my voice however, to the many others who strongly protest the removal of a homebirth service for Kings Lynn and the surrounding areas.

Six months ago, I gave birth to a daughter, my fifth child. Having already experienced one hospital birth and three homebirths, I knew full well the difference between the two. Having discussed birth in great detail with hundreds of women over the last decade both as a mum, as a doula in training and an avid student of natural birth, I know both personally and from others experience (and the opinions of such birth experts as Marsden Wagner, Michel Odent, Sheila Kitzinger, Ina May Gaskin, Frederick Leboyer, Sarah Buckley) , that....

Birth hormones work best when not interfered with and women are free to labour and give birth instinctively and spontaneously, in an environment that feels private, safe, comfortable, primal, semi-dark, and quiet....

Adrenaline is produced in a woman's body when she is forced to endure a number of extra stimuli besides the already intense sensations of birth. Driving in a car, walking through a car-park, entering a busy hospital environment and accommodating a series of different faces, voices, noises, bright lights, personalities, the use of clinical language and presence of uniforms and machinery, being touched by strangers, the discomfort of the journey and being in institutionalised surroundings all trigger adrenaline, which prolongs birth and can potentially increase the pain of her labour.....

Once a woman sets foot inside a hospital, she surrenders a great deal of her power. She is now treated as a patient rather than an intelligent, fully-responsible adult, and it is easy for her to feel bullied into things either subtly or overtly, that she simply wouldn't stand for at home. In this environment, she is more likely to be treated like a little child, having to 'ask permission' to eat, drink, stand up, sit down, go to the loo, basically DO ANYTHING AT ALL. She is made to feel like this because of the language used. You aren't allowed xyz or you are allowed xyz are suddenly in the vocabulary. It is degrading and it is easy for women to feel very small in the face of a whole team of people in uniforms who are on their own patch. So as not to make anyone uncomfortable, or create any bad atmospheres she may consent to all sorts of things that she just wouldn't allow at home. A woman may be made to feel that she is on a timetable, or worse still, a conveyor belt, with reasoning behind protocols and decisions that may be entirely at odds with her own instincts. This can happen even with the most loving of midwives, simply because of the environment and rules necessary for the smooth functioning of hospital life.

A woman at home can make decisions for herself, eat when she feels hungry, drink when she wants to drink, wear whatever she likes, go for a walk if she feels like it, have a bath or do normal things right up until she gives birth, use her voice in a primal and powerful way, and find positions which help her moment-to-moment because she is not strapped up to machinery which restricts her movement. She can play with her children or bake a cake to take her mind off the pain, rather than be faced with a room with four blank walls and start reaching out for the drugs. She can invite or exclude whoever she feels comfortable with, rather than have a string of random strangers come

into her birth space and limits on how many birth supporters she is 'allowed' to have. She can be comforted by her husband or partner, in a way that does not make him feel like a spare part. He can sit or lie down and rest or eat or drink or be with the children as he wants or needs. He is not only included, but utterly integral to birth of his baby. He doesn't have to sit around on horrid plastic chairs and then be kicked out of the scene just at a time when he and mum should be basking, and bonding with their baby, that they made together. In hospital there can be an air of ownership of the baby by hospital staff, albeit temporary, and lots of fussing around doing things to the baby when they are born, rather than the beautiful calm that is more characteristic of a straightforward homebirth where mother is allowed to bond with her baby in a primal and undisturbed way, without strangers overtaking the experience with their own chatter, busyness and so on.

One of the very worst things about hospital birth is the cruel fact that it utterly alienates siblings from the birth of their brother or sister. This is an important life event, a rite of passage, a fundamentally spiritual event, not solely a clinical one, and to remove the option of homebirth is damaging because it creates a generation of girls and boys who do not know what birth looks like. This is wrong, to my mind. It was fundamentally important to my husband and myself that our children should not be excluded from this special, once only, event. Had we gone to hospital, they would be the poorer for it, in ways that statisticians, policy-makers and treasurers cannot grasp, because such things cannot be measured or be accounted for in financial terms.

And speaking of children, from a purely practical perspective, there is no physical way that I could rely on anyone to take on my four other children at the drop of a hat, while I laboured and was at hospital (until they saw fit to 'allow' me and the baby home. We have no family nearby, and our children are home-schooled, so are at home most days. At best we could have got a friend in our village to come and be with the children, but she, having a two children of her own and other commitments simply might not have been able to come. Most of our other friends have at last three or four children of their own, and so it is not an easy thing to orchestrate a childcare arrangement that was 100% reliable at the drop of a hat. (I give birth typically quite quickly).

So, not having the kind of funds for an Independent Midwife, my husband and I felt forced to choose for me to give birth to my daughter unassisted at home, because going to hospital felt like a very unhappy prospect in every sense. I most definitely did not want to be separated from my family, the very people who deserve to be at my baby's birth. I did not want to feel coerced, guilt-tripped, subtly pressured, time-pressured, drug-pressured or any other kind of pressured by staff who may well know my rights to choose and refuse in an informed way on my own terms, but might decide to pressure me by subtle means anyway, or by language that implied : 'Comply, or else we will give you less than loving care and create an atmosphere with our silent (or even not so silent) disapproval' - as seems to happen so often to women judging by the hundreds of birth stories and comments I have heard either first hand, through discussion forums, or in books. I also wanted my baby to have a gentle start in life, without having to go on a car journey so early on, and being exposed to so many strange sights, sounds, people, germs and so on, when most mammals at that age are simply snuggling and feeding and sleeping and recovering in a warm closely bonded blissful mother-baby cocoon!

To me, hospital very much feels as alien to primal, undisturbed birth as if you were to ask me to give birth on the moon. I fully understand and appreciate the need for hospitals for the sick. I understand that life-saving technology is a wonderful invention. But to go into hospital 'just in case' seems to invite a cascade of interventions that might otherwise have been avoided. It is my firm belief that when women birth undisturbed, in primal conditions, her body is usually able to work in partnership with her baby to a safe and satisfying end - with less complications than if she is monitored, time-

pressured, falsely induced, artificially sedated, or out of rhythm with her body, which usually knows what to do without the need for (well-meaning) interference. In hospitals, there is a culture of talking endlessly in terms of risk, and almost an obsession with looking for problems to fix or monitor, which can subtly rob women of their own power, making them question their own judgement and intuition, compromising their ability to give birth under their own steam.

In the county of West Sussex where I previously had two homebirths I was told by my GP how wonderful homebirth was, that it was a perfectly sane, and safe option, and was attended by wonderful, warm, loving and respectful midwives. There was never a climate of fear surrounding talk of homebirth, but a warmth and excitement about it. Two separate GPs exuded a positive and happy attitude about homebirth, which in turn, instilled confidence and made me feel that I was a sensible, rational woman, making a sensible, rational, safe choice.

Here in Lincolnshire, the message from my GP could not have been more different. The message was 'Homebirth is dangerous and too risky for us to endorse'. He told me he was effectively washing his hands of me, when I had my fourth child, five years ago - and I was in prime health with no problems - a totally straightforward pregnancy. During my recent pregnancy I asked the surgery to confirm their stance on homebirth and have a letter from the Long Sutton Medical Centre that confirms in writing that *NOT ONE GP* supports homebirth. This is just ridiculous, and frankly, shocking. The midwives, whilst lovely, need to, in my opinion, work harder on educating them so they don't scare women and alienate them so unnecessarily. What century are we living in? Even if the policy is out of their hands, GPs shouldn't be allowed to promote such a negative view of homebirth when there is so much evidence to show it is generally a safe option for most women. Is it any wonder, with this total lack of support or real understanding for home-birthing teamed with the lack of a homebirth service that I took my baby's birth into my own hands? To their credit, the local midwives at least seem to support homebirth as a concept, and did encourage me to write letters to my MP and speak to the SOM and so on - but a woman's energies when she is heavily pregnant and already caring daily for four other children are such that she doesn't want to get herself worked up, in fights and discussions that she knows are pointless. I did not wish to invite stress onto my unborn child, and get involved in futile conversations that would no doubt have really achieved nothing.

I am not directing my anger at any one particular midwife and I believe they do a good job within the limitations of a system which places money above all else, but it is clear from conversations with others that the local homebirth policy decision-makers clearly do not value local women as the intelligent, autonomous and strong mothers that they are, nor truly appreciate the depth of despair at the situation. I understand some midwives feel very frustrated on behalf of women too, and I feel sorry for them that they too are being denied the chance to work and learn away from the busy wards of the hospital, with all the protocols and restrictions to which they feel bound.

I hope for the sake of future generations that the homebirth service is reinstated here in this corner of East Anglia so that families and communities can reclaim birth for their own again and midwives do not lose the skills to be able to deal with normal births. I am glad hospitals exist for the sick, but since childbirth is generally a normal event when treated as such, it really makes sense to keep it where it belongs - with family, at home. Every baby deserves a gentle start in life. Every mother deserves as undisturbed a birth as possible if she so chooses. Every dad deserves unrestricted access to his baby during their first few days on earth. Every sibling should be able to witness the arrival of a kindred family soul as it arrives amongst them. Every midwife should have the right to offer the personalised loving care that homebirth allows. If it is so normal in countries like Holland, and in other counties in the UK, why is it treated here as such a dramatically more dangerous, risky and awkward to implement service? It's time local policy-makers woke up to the inhumanity of

withdrawing homebirth from the county and recognize how much it impoverishes families, midwives and the wider society to continue to deny what should be a fundamental, basic right.

Yours,

Paula Cleary

Mother-of-five, Birth Doula and Freelance writer, Cambridgeshire

September 2014

How Birthplace Matters was born...

After I wrote that letter to QEH policy-makers, I felt scared of showing it to anyone. I was afraid that they, along with midwives and GPs would think “What is this woman talking about?” So I plucked up the courage and showed it to a few mothers online and by email. Their reactions blew me away. So I shared it again and the same happened. People seemed to really identify with what I was saying. I started getting comments trickling in from midwives to say they supported what I was saying. The same support was coming from independent midwives... and doulas.... and GPs in training... and mothers who had home-birthed.... and mothers who had given birth in hospital...

People were asking to share it, and share it and share it! Over and over again, the message I was getting loud and clear, was: I agree with you. Your frustrations are those of many, many people. Thank you for speaking up and speaking out.

The messages are testament to the strength of people’s feelings about homebirth being removed and what giving birth at home, and in hospital felt like for them. So I decided to help give those people a voice, a platform to have their say, to help, with me, see if we can shift this daft policy, and help re-educate NHS service providers towards providing a service that truly reflects people’s physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual needs.

It started out as one little letter, and one story. Now it is everyone’s letter, and everyone’s stories.

If you read this and still think homebirth is too risky, too dangerous, too expensive, too unimportant to support, ask yourself –

What is the true cost of **not** providing a homebirth service?

What the experts have to say...

Beverley Beech, Chair of Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services, AIMS (See also page 80)

“The Queen Elizabeth Hospital has a responsibility to provide maternity care and they cannot withdraw the home birth service.

In 2000 the Nursing and Midwifery Council issued a statement about home births in which it states:

‘It is for the individual trust/health board to decide what type of maternity service it will provide. The service is expected to be one which is responsible to local requirements and, as far as home births are concerned, it is understood that a blanket policy of ‘no home births’ would not be acceptable to the maternity services in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.’

It further states:

‘While the employed midwife has a contractual duty to her employer, she also has a professional duty to provide midwifery care for women and would not wish to leave a woman in labour at home unattended, thus placing her at risk at a time when competent midwifery care is essential.’

Any woman denied a home birth on the grounds of staffing problems should complain to Monitor that this hospital is not fit for purpose and that they are putting fit and healthy women at risk by denying them the opportunity to birth in the safest place - at home”

Contact Monitor by email: cooperationandcompetition@monitor.gov.uk

Janet Balaskas, Founder of Active Birth and author of several books including ‘New Active Birth’

“There are some women who could not think of leaving their familiar home environment to give birth and they have the right to make this choice. I am a woman like this and gave birth to 3 of my 4 children at home after my first experience of a hospital birth. At home a woman can choose who is present, ensure that she has complete privacy, and have easy access to whatever she might need. She may choose NHS or Independent midwives, who, preferring to attend women at home, have experience and enthusiasm for natural birth. The birth attendants are on your territory, essentially as your guests and this can feel more empowering than leaving home and giving birth in their workplace – even when efforts are made to help mothers feel 'at home' - there is still a subtle difference between a birth centre and home.

It is a myth that it is necessarily safer to give birth in a hospital. Research evidence shows us that home birth is a safe choice provided there are no complications. These days we know that the more we can discover our mammalian instincts for birthing, the easier and more comfortable birth can be. Like other mammals we need a safe, private, familiar environment where we can labour undisturbed

and unobserved. Home is often the best place for this – especially when backed up by good sensitive midwifery and the local hospital. There is the added benefit in the UK of having two skilled midwives generally attending a home birth. So this choice also means that the focus is entirely on one birthing mother at a time - just as it should be! When I travel to teach abroad I am often shocked to find home births severely restricted and even illegal in some countries. When this happens I feel proud of our system in the UK, despite its failings, and hope that it goes from strength to strength and more women are informed that this is a safe choice that they are free to make.

Janet Balaskas – Founder of Active Birth

www.activebirthcentre.com

Professor Soo Downe OBE, Midwife and Chair of the UK Royal College of Midwives Campaign for Normal Birth

"If there was a pill that could be given to pregnant and labouring women that decreased the risk of late miscarriage, low birth weight, prematurity, and maternal infection, increased their chance of successfully breastfeeding their baby, and of completing labour and birth without experiencing an episiotomy, caesarean section, haemorrhage, while saving the NHS money, and without excess risk to the baby (except at a very low level and in very specific circumstances)... I am fairly sure that doctors, midwives, and health service providers would be clamouring for women to have the opportunity to have that drug, and, indeed, insisting that it is unethical to withhold it.

These are the kinds of outcomes associated with booking for home birth during pregnancy. So does it suddenly become less effective, less ethical as a treatment, because it is a way of *doing* birth, and not a drug? Surely not. All health professionals, actively or by inference, sign up to the philosophy of 'first do no harm'. The opposite way of reading the data above is that healthy women and babies who would choose the model of care associated with booking for a home birth but who are denied it are being exposed to excess harm. How is this defensible in the light of the Hippocratic Oath? It is long past time for us move on from outdated beliefs about place of birth, and to embrace the formal and informal evidence that choice of place of birth is a moral and ethical imperative."

Virginia Howes, Homebirth Champion and Independent Midwife as seen on the television programme Home Delivery, and author of 'The Baby's Coming'

"Study after study has shown home birth to be a safe and rewarding experience for women and midwives as well as a cheaper alternative than hospital birth for service providers, yet it still is not being given the marketing attention it deserves."

Adela Stockton, registered Psychodynamic Therapist, specialising in Birth Trauma & Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and author of 'Birth Space, Safe Place'

"A positive birth experience is every mother and babies human right. How safe a mother feels in the place she is giving birth can drastically affect the way her baby is born. If a mother feels most safe to birth her baby at home, then it is vital that health care providers support her in this decision. Birth trauma experienced from feeling unsafe during birth can affect the mother/baby relationship with far reaching implications for the long term mental health of both individuals, fathers as well. Furthermore, as evidence suggests, homebirth is no less safe than hospital birth and comes at considerably less cost to the taxpayer" www.adelastocktoncounselling.net

Vanessa Cummings, mother in QEH catchment area, King's Lynn, Norfolk

"Dear Paula,

I read your Birth Matters document (first edition) and felt compelled to write and add my voice.

I'm a mother of two. During my first pregnancy I was discouraged from having a home birth. Feeling vulnerable and not confident in my choices I agreed to hospital birth. The resulting experience was traumatic and I still struggle to think of it more than three years later.

When I became pregnant with my second child I knew I wanted a home birth and planned for this. At around 30 weeks pregnant I went to a birth group and by chance found out that the QEH had suspended its home birth service. At this point my midwife had not mentioned this to me. This was a shock.

One of the reasons I wanted a home birth was so that my older daughter could be there. Having to leave her to go to hospital was quite stressful for me. My baby aspirated meconium and we had a prolonged hospital stay. I will never know if my stress caused her to become distressed, but I have read studies that support the theory that a mother's stress can cause distress to the unborn baby.

I do not know if I will ever give birth again, partly because the thought now instils me with fear. Having had two hospital births, both with less than positive outcomes for either mother or baby, I would not feel confident having a third.

I find it very sad that women in our area do not have the choice of where to give birth. Having a baby is a huge life event, one where you are at your most vulnerable. The impact of removing that choice is very unfair and potentially damaging to those women who would choose to birth at home but are forced into hospital.

I really hope that our voices will be heard and can influence a positive change in this situation."

Anna Culy, a mother who was refused a homebirth by Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kings Lynn, Norfolk

"The removal of the homebirth service resulted in a lot of stress for me in the final weeks of my pregnancy. Instead of preparing for the arrival of my baby, I was left to frantically search around for support to get me through what I now perceived to be a traumatic event that was about to take place. Instead of remaining calm about the birth, I was gradually becoming more anxious; not about the physical act of giving birth, but about being taken out of my home and made to give birth in a brightly lit, clinical environment surrounded by unfamiliar people. I was scared about the impact this would have on my ability to birth naturally, the increase in adrenaline rather than oxytocin, which would make the birth difficult for me and my baby. It took a lot of reassurance from others and willpower from me to try and remain calm after having the choice of where to give birth taken away from me.

I did manage to birth naturally in hospital with the amazing support of my husband and doula, but the circumstances were just as I feared. I desperately wanted to stay in the safety of my home but instead had to block out the audience as I made my way through the hospital and try and remain focussed under the bright lights of the birth pool room. These are the main memories I have of the birth, not the joyous arrival of my son into the world. The experience has left me feeling disempowered, which has impacted on the first months of my son's life. Instead of healing from the birth emotionally and moving into my new role as a mother, I feel trapped with feelings of sadness about how I was forced into giving birth somewhere where I didn't feel safe to"

Antony Culy, husband of Anna, a father who was denied a homebirth for his son at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kings Lynn, Norfolk

"I was very disappointed by the hospital's decision to remove the home birth service. Anna and I had decided very early on that if our pregnancy had been normal we would like a home birth. I believe a home birth helps mum relax into the birth process and allows baby to be born more easily leading to less complications. I am well aware of the financial difficulties the Trust is in having been part of the staff who helped them attain foundation status. However the fact that the management were able to take a Trust which Monitor had said was financially stable and, within a few short years, turn it into a Trust in special measures says to me that the financial troubles were due to management's incompetence and not just bad luck. In the end Edison was born safely and in water as we wanted but overall I wouldn't say I was happy with the birth experience. We had our plans ruined by circumstances brought about directly because of poor decisions on the part of Trust management. It's a sad situation because we would have to think long and hard about using the maternity services at QEH again."

Jeanette Stevens, mother who was denied a homebirth at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn

"When we found out we were expecting again, there was no question about; we would be having another home birth. Our son, Jensen, had arrived safe and sound with us just 10 months previously and having him at home was the most amazing feeling ever. For myself it was empowering, strengthening, relaxed, blissful...and for my husband equally so, as it was relaxing for him - he felt involved and at ease. Labour was quick, I dare say even painless as we were both just relaxing. Ok, we

spent the evening watching Harry Potter and eating popcorn but there was no rush, just us and the wee man on the way. As our son was born at 4 am, my husband would have risked being sent home, had we been in hospital. Instead we could wave the midwives goodbye and walk up into bed, OUR bed and just enjoy cuddle time with him.

So when we at 32 weeks were suddenly told that the home birth service was suspended, it was devastating and frustrating. Devastating to be told that our daughter would have to arrive in a hospital bed, not in the same warm and comforting surroundings as Jensen. I actually felt guilty as I wanted her to have the same start. Not to mention that I hate hospitals, my parents have between them spent too much time there so unless there is a medical emergency I try and avoid it. My stomach felt cold, sick...I really couldn't imagine how I would manage Labour in an environment I didn't feel at ease in. My husband felt the same, so with this in mind we campaigned against the decision and tried to put pressure on the hospital. We contacted everyone we could think of and even made the papers, television and made some amazing friends on the journey. It wasn't exactly what we had imagined as being told so close to labour that a) our choice wasn't available and b) they wouldn't help us find alternatives. It was stressful and a very worrisome time. What should have been an amazing few months preparing for our daughter was suddenly stressful and grey.

Finding no help anywhere we sought out an independent midwife, Nicky Garrett. It wasn't cheap but nothing could put a price on the experience we had with Jensen and we wanted to give our daughter the best start to life. We were now sorted, bank account emptied but reassured as we could have our daughter at home. However despite this we kept the emails and letters up as we still found the decision appalling.

For women wanting a home birth, going to QEH is probably the most remote option as it isn't midwife led, nor does it have a very natural and relaxing birthing unit. Selfishly we have kept the battle up to reinstate what should be a right (unless of course there is a medical emergency) for ALL birthing mothers. Not the choice to have a home birth, but to have a birth the way they want it; whether fully drugged-up with epidurals etc. right through to giving birth in a field. I obviously prefer the comforts of home but I so truly believe it is a human right and also the healthiest option for mum and child. The more relaxed you are the better it goes, normally. Unfortunately we will probably have to face this all again soon as we do want a little brother or sister to Jensen and Penelope... won't have the same financial backup as we are still paying back the other so we are obviously quite concerned."

Lanaya Harvey-Davitt, mother in QEH catchment area, who was refused a homebirth midwifery service and gave birth alone, wrote the following letter which I include in this second edition with her permission

A Complaint for the Refusal of a Homebirth

"Let me begin by telling you I believe that I have a right to not only choose to give birth at home, but to do so safely i.e. with the presence of a midwife. It is not my aim to convince you that homebirths are just as safe as hospital births (Cheyney et al, 2014) or that homebirths are more economically effective than hospital births (Schroeder et al, 2012). I'm sure you are already well aware of the concept of oxytocin, the impact it has on birth and how the mere act of travelling to the hospital, let

alone being at the unfamiliar environment and following hospital protocols, interferes with this wonderful birthing hormone. No, sadly, my aim is to justify to you why women should have the right to choose to give birth in their home or in the hospital, and how you are prohibiting this fundamental right of a birthing woman.

During my pregnancy I spoke to two different Supervisors of Midwives, one at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kings Lynn and one at Edith Cavell Centre, Peterborough about the possibility of a homebirth (my community midwife had informed me that they had been suspended). I explained that this would be my second home birth, my first labour was uncomplicated and this pregnancy was low risk. Both refused to offer me a midwife for a homebirth. They both sounded quite uncomfortable in doing so, and so they should, as they were basically saying “all midwives within an hour’s radius to your home are employed by us and we forbid any of them to go to you when you are in need”. They did however leave me with these options:

- 1) Birth at home and call an ambulance
- 2) Birth at the hospital/midwife led unit (they are one and the same to me)
- 3) Birth at home and hire an independent midwife

I was left feeling deflated, disappointed and disempowered with regard to my own body and labour. I thought about the telephone conversations for a while. There are many times in my life where my wants or needs were of little consequence and I expect many more to come. I accept this. However, I came to the realisation that I will not accept my wishes, for how I choose to bring my child into the world, to be trivialised or dismissed, nor should any woman. Birthing at home is a perfectly reasonable request. I shall explain to you, in turn, why each of these options presented to me were inadequate for facilitating appropriate care during my labour.

An ambulance team have but one day’s worth of training in supporting women in labour. Their role is to deal with emergencies and their persona reflects this. Their objective would be to transfer me to the hospital. I hope you will agree an ambulance would not provide me with adequate care to support me in giving birth.

Let me try to describe what my child’s birth day is to me, in order to illustrate why it is I, and many other women, do not want to give birth at a hospital (aside from the fact of feeling it is the safer option due to limited interventions and an abundance of oxytocin). The day I labour and give birth is similar to Christmas/Hanukah/Diwali; feelings of joy, reverence and peace. Coercing me to give birth in a hospital is like making a Christian, Jew or Hindu spend this sacred day at a police station, an unfamiliar formal environment surrounded by strangers, away from family – sure, it can be done, and hey, it may even be safer (there are police around, just in case!) but the magic and beauty and benevolence you should feel on that day, in your sanctuary, in your home will, most likely, be minimized and even marginalised. It is in fact these ideals that bring labour and birth on so peacefully and allow me to birth without fear and with minimal pain, making birth a powerfully transformative experience into motherhood, as it should for all women.

I am not suggesting that hospital births cannot give women this experience, only that it could not for me. This is the major point I would like to emphasize –this is why it is so important that we, as birthing women, have choices.

For me, labour and birth is a spiritual passage that should take place at home. This is how I feel about the birth of my children and who is anyone to tell me otherwise? It is my body, my labour, my home - it is my right to choose to give birth in my house, without compromising on safety. If it is not my right, then whose? Who is it that feels it is their right to decide where I shall give birth, and in fact, where all the women in the Norfolk and Fenland areas give birth? The NHS provides wonderful perinatal care across the country. However, having a monopoly on birth, I would have thought, comes with specific responsibilities to respect the rights of the women under your care to make choices about their bodies and births, in order to avoid a dictatorship. Why women's birthing rights so far down the list of priorities on the NHS? Are we not entitled to autonomy over our own bodies? Is it that women's birthing rights are a "luxury" that the NHS cannot afford?

This brings me to the last option suggested to me: Independent midwifery. This seems like the obvious answer - a woman "indulging" in the births of her children, wanting choices, ah well it's only fair she should have to take the bill - Independent Midwifery is expensive and so not an option for everyone. You may be thinking "well you should have thought about that before you became poor", but there are many more reasons why Independent Midwifery is an inadequate option to be suggested to me. IM are a rare species, I could only find one within an hour's radius of my home (and as you can imagine timing is of the essence when travelling to a woman in labour). If you are fortunate enough to find an IM that is willing to travel out to you, you will then have to pray she isn't already fully booked - due to working on call, often IM cannot realistically book more than two birthing women in one month. To suggest an IM as an option is deception from the truth; you are taking away my right to choose to give birth at home. Aside from this, since when is it acceptable for the NHS, my NHS, to recommend that I should go private? What will be next, if I want to give birth in a private room at the hospital I should go private? Or if I want to be supported to breastfeed, I should go private?

I hope that you will agree that it is really quite awful that I even have to explain and justify myself. It is my intent that, in my doing so, I can help pave the way for future birthing women to have their birthing desires listened to, valued and carried out.

Best wishes,
Lanaya Harvey-Davitt"

Fiona Ebbs, Independent Midwife, West Norfolk Midwifery

"Paula, I can't like this letter enough. I agree with all that you have written. As a midwife it sums up my frustrations that all I believe in, and have learned through training about normal birth for healthy women, is becoming increasingly difficult to put into practice within the constraints of the modern NHS. Hence I have made the decision to move into independent midwifery practice. It does sadden me that my services will only be available to families who can afford to pay for what should be a basic right for all."

Annabel Bryant, Ex NHS Matron and Independent Midwife

“Brilliantly written and articulate. I am an Independent Midwife and works for 2 NHS Trusts on their banks. For one of the Trusts, I am on call for their home births when they are unable to cover the service. I am also an ex matron. You have managed to put into words what so many women feel about their birth and how the system blindly works against them.”

Annette Ashford, mother, Midwife and member of East Of England Midwives group

“Fantastic Paula. I'm very sorry you feel so let down. I think there is a lot of scope for educating GPs”

Suzanne Howlett, Doula UK Regional Mentor for Norfolk, and founder of Divinely Nurtured

“All women should be supported in their choices for birth . We are individual with unique circumstances, a baby’s birth is a once in a lifetime experience which must be honoured as the sacred start to life. This is a human rights issue, policy makers , money savers , fear mongers and conveyer belt attitudes are neither honouring or respectful of a woman's need to value her birthing experience , and give birth in the way that feels right to her , wherever and whenever possible . There are many angry and anguished voices needing to be heard both mothers and homebirth midwives needing to come to a place of peace.....”

Dr. Sophie Messenger (PhD), Antenatal Teacher and Doula

I am a scientist by background, with a PhD in biology and over 20 years of experience as a research scientist in both the academic and industry sector. You could say that I was not your typical candidate for a homebirth, which is usually associated in people's mind with a more "alternative" background. Yet I gave birth to my children at home in Cambridge in 2006 and 2009. Both births were the more incredible, empowering, and life affirming experiences of my life. They led me to quit my scientific career to become an antenatal teacher and a doula, because I believe that supporting parents in their journey is the most important job there is, and that all women deserve the right emotional, physical and informational support to have the best possible birth experience. Birth is not just about the arrival of a baby, it is about the birth of a family, the birth of a new mother and a new father. Research shows that it is not so much what happens during the birth that matter, but how people were made to feel during the birth. With the right support, and kind, respectful attendants, even a birth which ends up with many interventions can be a positive experience. Sadly in my current professional capacity, I see a majority of less than positive experiences, people who are misinformed, coerced, and generalised forced to comply with the rules and protocols of a system which disrespects and disempowers parents. I also see a lot of stressed, overworked NHS staff who care deeply but struggle try to make the best of a system who cares more about paperwork and liability than people. I tell parents to complain. The maternity care system is broken and it needs to change.”

Maddie McMahon, mother, Doula Mentor and Doula Trainer, ABM Breastfeeding Counsellor & Tutor

"If we are to build a maternity service that is fit for purpose, we all need to agree what that purpose is. At the moment, society seems happy with a service that has the most basic definition of purpose: alive mothers and babies. If we are to build a society that is less spiritually empty, psychologically and physically healthy, we need to focus on the wellbeing of the motherbaby dyad. Whole and healthy motherbaby equates to a strong, healthy society which benefits us all and costs us less.

It is a fundamental human right to choose where and with whom to give birth. Our caregivers have a duty of care to support women in their birth choices. Any management system or political landscape that does not facilitate a homebirth service is letting down both mothers and midwives, disenfranchises families, diminishes our faith in the health service and makes a mockery of what that health service originally stood for."

Sandra P, Midwife

"Wonderful letter Paula, as a midwife who has had home birth I whole heartedly agree, beautifully put"

Shawn Walker, Independent Midwife, Norfolk

"Homebirth has been shown to reduce harm to women by lowering rates of heavy post-birth bleeding requiring blood transfusions and vaginal cutting (episiotomy). It reduces other unnecessary interventions, such as instrumental deliveries, which are associated with greater rates of incontinence in later life, and caesarean sections, which harm future generations as well by increasing rates of unexplained stillbirth and uterine rupture in future pregnancies. It is NOT about a nice experience. Home birth is evidence-based care. Not providing a home birth service is a sexually discriminant policy and an infringement of these women's human rights. The women of Norfolk deserve to be treated as well as women in other areas of the UK, which has a clear national policy that a home birth service should be provided. Outside Norfolk, the UK provides for the international community many exemplary care models from better-managed areas about how that should be done." Shawn Walker, Midwife, Lecturer, mother of four boys born at home in Norfolk, and one of several independent midwives who have offered to help be part of the solution in Norfolk. BTW, my e-mail is Shawn.Walker.1@city.ac.uk

Jenny Davis, doctor and trainee GP

"I am a doctor and a trainee GP and I had a homebirth following an uncomplicated normal pregnancy. Given the reading I did around the subject, my medical background and having worked in Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Paediatrics, I consider that I made an educated decision in choosing homebirth. I found it reassuring knowing that 2 consultant Obstetricians in my local hospital had chosen homebirth for themselves. I was fully supported by my local midwifery service, not questioned on my choice and had a normal labour in excellent experienced hands. My son was in an OP position and despite this situation, I was given time and support to allow a labour without unnecessary medical intervention in a hospital. I am glad that there is the wonderful safety of an excellent hospital service locally if I required it, but I am so grateful my husband and I were able to experience a safe, normal homebirth for our beautiful son. I would choose this option again in future pregnancies and regularly share my positive experience with friends thinking about their options for birth. It makes me so sad and

disappointed that you did not get the support from the NHS you deserved. I am shocked that homebirth is not supported as an option at all where you live, I had no idea this would be the case in the UK currently."

Carole Goddard, Independent Midwife

"Well done on a brilliant letter, really gets the point across."

Joy Horner, Independent Midwife, and founder of BirthJoy

"Your letter is very powerful and the recipients could learn so much if they read it. More women need to write to highlight how the service is not serving them. I am deeply concerned about the turning away from maternity services. Freebirth is a wonderful thing as an empowered birth option. What worries me is more and more women are not calling midwives out of fear of what midwives may say or do to them or their babies. I heard of a bad outcome in these circumstances recently. I bend over backwards to serve women (and in my area not many can pay) to avoid women being alone and scared in birth. Not all women need midwives. At most births I do very little but very occasionally it is useful to have a midwife on hand for the rare emergencies...."

Lisa Smith, mother-of-three, teacher, and Co-ordinator for West Norfolk Mothers' Sling Library

"Such beautiful words"

Carole P, NHS Midwife

"Wow this is powerful... I have just copied and pasted and will send as an attachment to my fellow SOM colleagues, thank you. I feel passionate that home birth is the norm until reasons for a hospital birth are truly identified".

Lou Pouget, NHS and Independent Midwife

"I'm an independent and NHS midwife passionate about normal birth. The problem is the system and an inbuilt, inbred fear of normal birth within some of the midwifery profession. They only see abnormal. Therefore become desensitised to 'normal'. It's the midwifery training that's needs to be looked at and seriously readdressed."

Lorraine B, NHS Community Midwife

"Amazing! And I say that as a home birthing mama and an NHS community midwife. Thank you"

Sophie Adams, mother, baby massage Instructor, doula, childminder, and Positive Birth Movement co-ordinator, Norfolk

"Hey Paula... just took the time to really, really, read this in a quiet room and blooming heck woman - thank you for sharing! I think this should be shared with our local MP as it is something that should be on their radar. Such a powerful letter."

West Norfolk Positive Birth Group, Norfolk

"Wow. Paula thank you for sharing. I sat and read it end to end while my kettle boils over and have shed a few tears, and nodded a lot. Thank you for writing something so personal and heartfelt, and yet something that draws in so many professional opinions from well-respected people in the industry. The pressure of feeling you have no choice but to birth alone is a heavy one, and I am sorry that because of this situation you felt you had to take it on your shoulders as a family. Congratulations belatedly on your safe arrival though. Thank you again for not just penning this but sharing it with us"

Vicki Markham Williams, mother, birth doula and founder of My Doula, NCT breastfeeding counsellor, IBCLC Lactation Consultant

"Home birth is as safe for babies and safer for women than birth in a consultant-led unit - it offers superior emotional care and it is cheaper. It also relieves the pressure on stretched services so that those who actively choose hospital birth or need emergency medical care have more resources available to them. Why would you not support women who are making choices that are better for them AND better for the health service? Women only get one shot to birth that baby, they deserve to have the right to do that in circumstances that suit them. Those who do not understand the difference between homebirth and hospital birth have missed a vital piece of their education in supporting women."

Milli Hill, mother, Founder of the Positive Birth Movement and freelance writer on Pregnancy and Birth

"All women should be able to choose where and how they give birth. This is a human right. Furthermore this is about more than just the logistics of location. To give birth at home is totally different to giving birth in hospital, and for many women it can be a very meaningful and life-enhancing experience. To deny women the right to birth at home is to deny them the chance to begin motherhood in this potentially deeply meaningful way"

Kimberley Pickersgill, 32 weeks pregnant mother, Boston, Lincs

"I'm stood applauding after reading your articulate, professional and powerful letter! Just what I needed to read this evening. Thank you for finding the strength to write and share.... I'm having similar discussions up the road in Boston. It's very frustrating and as you wrote, it's not the fight/stress you want in pregnancy.... I thankfully have a good relationship with the SOM and she is very encouraging and completely agrees with our views. Unfortunately her team doesn't seem supported by the Trust...."

Amanda Dixon, mother, Ex-Midwife, and Birth Doula at Lotus Doula

“Pregnancy and birth is a normal physiological event in your life just like eating is. Using the hospital/midwifery service is like choosing how to eat. What is this woman talking about I hear you ask? You can choose if you go to a restaurant or to eat at home; you go in and you choose from the menu what you want to have; and you choose how much to eat etc.; and you choose when to leave – the restaurant have no business to force you to go there; to force you to eat or to force upon you what you choose to eat; or force you to stay. You can even choose whether you go out to restaurant at all - and then you choose if you want to call for a take away again choosing what you have, from whom or to go it alone and heaven forbid to cook for yourself!!! The same goes for the hospital and birth. The services offered at the hospital are similar to a menu – they can offer what they recommend but it is ultimately up to you whether you have that or something else or nothing at all!! The menu contains everything from whether you have an appointment with a midwife or a consultant, whether you have a blood test or a scan, whether you have any drugs, whether you use a pool or a bed or both or neither, whether you are induced or not etc. etc. You can pick and choose off that menu or decide to have nothing at all, call for a takeout or go it alone. We expect the staff at the restaurant to provide good customer service and we should be able to expect that from the NHS too after all we are paying for this service!!! The sooner the NHS remembers that they are public servants paid for by the public and therefore need to provide good customer services the better.”

Kate Woods, founder and facilitator at Conscious Birthing

“Birth at home is my choice and human right. That's where I feel safe and relaxed, which is exactly what I need to have a physiological birth. Someone who wants to birth at home and is forced to go into hospital against their will, is both denying them their human rights and setting up a potential cascade of intervention, as the relaxed and trusting state needed to birth well is replaced by fear and tension. Hospital is great for when and if there's a problem, and nothing short of an intervention when there is not.”

Corina, Midwife

“Fantastic letter. May I share it please?!”

Beverley Gazy, mother, doula and founder of Birth Your Way

“What an amazing letter Paula, please allow me to share some paragraphs with my local home birth group.”

Liz Greenan, mother-of-two and birth doula at BirthWise Doula

“I am a passionate supporter of homebirth. I believe it is increasingly becoming the SAFER option for Mums with the rising rates of hospital-acquired infections (the highest mortality rate for mothers who have just birthed their babies being septicaemia). In my opinion a trend towards homebirths would save the NHS a heap of money - even to the point of saving the NHS. I think that it's pure scare-mongering and fear of litigation and dare I say it, a paternalistic medicalised system, that tells women that they need to be in the hospital and pretty much do what the health professionals tell them to. I birthed my own 2 children at home and enjoy supporting others to do so. I'd love to see this country

move towards the 24% rate of homebirths that women enjoy in the Netherlands. Finally, as more research is suggesting that "seeding of the mother's microbiome" which occurs during vaginal delivery could be an essential factor for babies future health - now is surely the time to reconsider the NHS's policy nation-wide for homebirth? "

Rachel Hertogs, mother, doula, teacher, and founder of Moon Times

"In Pembrokeshire we have just seen our local labour ward closed and replaced with a 'midwife led ward'- with only 4 beds (only for women with no complications- those mamas have to travel to the next county to birth) and there are not enough community midwivesmy only hope from this awful situation is that women will choose home birth. We are setting up a Pembrokeshire positive birth group in the hope of spreading the word of natural, safe, positive birth- and letting women know their rights and their choices. I was shocked when I mentioned at my ante natal group 5 years ago I was having a home birth and none of them knew there was that choice! I have since trained as a doula and I too am passionate about educating and supporting women in birth."

Jenny Pourian, mother-of-one (born at home), Midwife

"Hi Paula, I just want to say good luck and thank you for doing what you can to make home birth available to all women in the UK. I am a midwife myself, passionate natural birth and home birth supporter/promoter, mother of one born at home of course! It is disgraceful that all women are not able to experience the beauty of a home birth and it makes my heart very heavy when I hear stories of midwives not respecting women's wishes"

Gaby L, Future Midwife-in-training

"Wow what an amazing letter & what a fantastic ambassador for women's birth rights you are. This letter truly moved me & I am incredibly lucky that around my part of the country our maternity services proactively encourage home births. It's a really powerful letter & one I'm going to keep saved if you don't mind so that when I am in midwifery training I can be reminded of how important the women's voice is & not get too sucked into protocol"

B, Health professional and mother

"You need to send this to the HOSPITAL management too, Women should NOT have to plan a home birth to have access to a supportive birth environment. We need to campaign to make hospitals woman and labour friendly - to question WHY is there a need for bright lights, temperatures of rooms that cannot change and lack of dignity (if this is women's experience). The MSLCs and User Groups need to "walk the floor" regularly - women, partners, staff, managers - together before every meeting to see what needs to change"

Chloe Smith, mother-of-two, SW London

"What a powerful letter, I wanted to shout 'yes!' At every sentence. It's everything I feel about birth but have struggled to verbalise. You speak for many women. It's brilliant Paula"

Anna Heffron, mother-of-two, Norfolk

"Dear Paula, Just read your letter, what a fantastic heartfelt plea it is to the powers that be. As you know, I had both my kids at home (my second in Norfolk), in birthing pools and had two really wonderful, calm births without the need for any pain relief or intervention of any kind. I had two midwives present at both and they were really supportive and helpful both times; I felt very safe knowing they were there to help. I was truly shocked to learn that the option to home-birth is no longer available through the NHS in our area; it seems incredulous to me that something so natural should be prevented from happening. I still cannot understand the reasons for it, if it is solely a matter of money, surely it is more expensive for women to use the hospital resources to give birth than their own home? I had such a great experience of home-birthing in Norfolk six years ago, I am truly saddened to think others will not benefit the way my family did. I feel so lucky to have been afforded the opportunity to have the births I wanted and the births I knew were right for me and can only hope that your letter (and all the responses to it), is actually listened to. Well done for writing this Paula and well done for pursuing your own home-birth in the face of adversity, I would like to think I would have done the same."

Joni Lawless, mother

"I love this. Massive support for you and your message here"

Ross Mountney, mother of two and author

"I was 'emotionally blackmailed' out of a home birth because of being an 'older' mum and thanks to that my baby nearly died. She was born in the car on the way to the hospital. My intuition told me that a home birth would be better for us as the first was born very fast, we live rurally and it was winter and snowy! As it was the birth was on the back seat, unaided, husband still driving through the snow. We thankfully 'survived' and she only suffered hypothermia but I regret that she was born in such stressful and unpleasant circumstances. Mums should listen to their intuition more - I do now! "

Miriam Grey, Norfolk

"I had a nightmare labour and delivery in Bury St Edmunds with my first in their "birthing unit" which ultimately led to me being transported down a busy hallway naked, leg in stirrups fully dilated to a hospital bed where I was shamed for not drinking enough water as my veins had collapsed from dehydration so they couldn't hook me up to an IV (and we all know where it goes from there). I spent 16 hours in their birthing unit and was refused a water birth as my waters had already broken, which I later found out to be an unwarranted reason for refusal. I started having severe vomiting and diarrhoea and became weak quite quickly to the point of no longer being able to stand. My partner kept giving me fluids all of which I couldn't keep down. When he frantically went to them for help (we were left in the room alone the entire time) they said "Aw, it's just nerves love." As my partner tried to help me to the hospital bed he was told "Let her do it, I wouldn't put my back out if I were you." which he ignored completely. The midwives were angry with me, I had a long and difficult labour and they were tired of me, they wanted a new face. I remember one woman distinctly lifting the towel they draped over my legs, laughing and saying "Oh dear what a state!" to her colleagues who

chuckled behind their clip boards and folders of notes, the same notes I read fascinated and in awe of, the first details of this swirling light inside me. By this point my spirit was too broken to demand respect, I detached and only thought of my baby going forward. She was ultimately the one who delivered my son, she was the first human being to touch my perfect son and that has always haunted me. Losing my first baby in a terrible accident in my second trimester I was terrified. This was in my notes. The notes they didn't read and didn't care about, the notes they held to their faces and laughed into. They told me I would have to spend the night but I took a shower, refused as my son was perfectly healthy, insisted I would rest better at home and discharged myself from their "care". For weeks, months, year I would relive this experience and cry. My partner living guilt ridden for years, ashamed he did do more, that he didn't change it all somehow. It was a heavy blow to new parents and a young family.

My second birth was to be a homebirth here in Norwich but they refused on the day due to high blood pressure? The same reason I was refused in their birthing unit. In yet another hospital room with a bed I met an angel called Sam. She was the most amazing midwife and I couldn't have hoped for a better midwife. I was able to give birth to both of them naturally without intervention but it felt anything from natural. I have never shared this story and it has felt liberating to tell it to you."

G.C, mother-of-three, West Norfolk

"I have had one hospital birth in Kent and two home births; the first in Kent and the second in Norfolk. When I was labouring in hospital my husband and I felt abandoned as we were left alone for a very long time in the delivery room, which was very distressing. It was our first baby and we had assumed by going into hospital the care and support we needed would be available throughout the labour and during birth. My labour was very intense, long and painful.

When I fell pregnant again I chose a homebirth and feel very lucky to have had this option. I strongly believe that this choice should be a right for every expectant mother.

In contrast, birthing at home, the place I feel the most comfortable was a profound experience for me. I felt relaxed and calm and both my labours were very quick without complications. The midwives who came to my home were respectful, non-intrusive, caring and amazing! They encouraged me to stay relaxed and trusted my body knew exactly what it was doing in its own time and put no pressure on me at all. They gave me the space to move when I felt the need to, get into the bath when I wanted to, and birth in my own way without feeling hurried or pressurized.

By suspending homebirths in Norfolk the midwives are being deprived of sharing this joyful experience and sacred rite of passage. Midwives should be valued more for the incredible work they do and there should be freedom of choice for all. In this age of austerity isn't it

wisser to listen to women who know their bodies and know what they want and save on the cost of hospitalization?”

Melissa Dudley, mother-of-six, Cambridgeshire

“Paula, I fully back you all the way. I had 4 hospital births where I was persuaded and talked into having pain relief and intervention... my 5th started at home but I was literally bullied into going to hospital... then my last birth was the most amazing, calm, pain free, easy and relaxed birth, which was at home. I am absolutely convinced environment is key. It's very clear (just like so many other women) I felt safe at home to birth my baby! It is with mixed feelings that I was so lucky to have had the option and support of the midwife, because it should be available for all regardless of luck, postcode, lottery, etc.

If only these people could see the whole picture and really support birth to be what it is meant to be – a rite of passage in the chosen environment where the mother feels safe. If women birth where they feel safe then it would be cost effective - less or no pain relief, less or no medical intervention, less or no surgery, less or no postnatal depression, quicker healing/recovery... why don't these people see it? I feel utter sorrow and heart ache for those women that have had that choice taken away because of another person's power. Thank you for speaking out for all women and their babies.”

Nicole Lord, mother and doula, Cambridgeshire

“Having spent 4 days in labour I believe that if I'd have not been at home I would have been forced into a C-section. There's a time and a place for medical intervention and saving lives of mothers and babies who are in danger is a very difficult job. But there is also a time and place for hands off support in a familiar environment.

I went in to hospital twice during my labour, once to the midwife led unit and once to main labour ward. Of all the three places I laboured, home was by far the best. There's nothing like having a baby, climbing the stairs and cuddling up in your own bed. Especially when your mum has just changed the sheets for you!”

Awen Clement, mother-of-four, doula and founder of BirthPeace

“I was lucky I had a homebirth for my fourth baby. Not lucky in the sense that it went ok (in fact it went beautifully) but lucky that I live in an area which supports homebirth. Lucky that I live in an area where doctors and midwives are up to date with evidence around birth. Lucky that I live in an area where doctors and midwives don't tell women lies because it makes their lives easier. Every woman has a fundamental human right to give birth where she wants and with whom she wants. Every woman has the right to be as lucky as me.”

Jackie Howe , mother, doula and co-founder at New Beginnings Doula Services, Norfolk

“Thank you Paula, that was a very moving letter, straight from the heart and I feel privileged to have been able to read it.”

Caroline, mother, doula, homestart family support worker, and nutritionist

“Brilliantly written Paula. We still have some good homebirth midwives in West Sussex too (have met some in Hampshire recently, real hands off according to the mums birth plans)....”

Zara de Candole, mother-of-two and hypnobirthing doula, founder of Doulabud

“Bravo, you beautiful woman. Denying people the right to a homebirth is simply wrong. How can you remove the right to choose something so fundamental and something that is available so freely to others? Home is where the heart is, it is where the family belongs and for many, that means the place that their children take their first breath. It is not complicated, quite the reverse! The Surrey Hills Homebirth Team are brilliant. It is removing people’s rights not offering this option. “

Emma-Jane P, mother and homebirthing hopeful

“Thank you so much for this. It explains exactly why I've opted for a HB this time around and will help me explain to others what I've been so far unable to verbalise”

Emma Stromberg-Ashworth , mother, AIMS committee member

“I'm on the AIMS committee and will share it there with your permission?”

Olivia O’Neill, mother-of-two, West Norfolk

“My first child was born in 2002 in the leading teaching hospital University College London. I was not made aware of any choice for home birth.

I was 9cm dilated on arrival to the hospital and was rushed into the labour room, whilst a midwife was pulling my jacket off and I was climbing onto the bed, I noticed over 11 people had followed myself and my husband into the room. Crammed around me were over 12 people watching my every move. I shouted to one of the nurses; “Who the hell are these people, get them out!” My husband appeared lost in the crowd.

I was told very firmly by a male midwife I’d never met before that “these people are students and have been waiting a long time for another woman to give birth but she wasn’t anywhere near as close as I was to giving birth. Your birth is clearly imminent and they just want to see a live birth”.

I struggled to get comfortable with my un-invited audience. It was painful and embarrassing, young men as well as young women watching me in agony. Within 30 minutes of getting to hospital the midwife shouted, get an epidural. I screamed ‘NO’ as I was determined to try as natural a birth as I could.

Fortunately I managed to pull my hand away as they were putting a syringe in my hand ready to administer unwanted pain relief. I pushed as hard as I could and my baby’s head was half way out.

Before I knew it a midwife had forceps and was tugging on my baby's head. My first son was born within 45 minutes of arriving at the hospital. It was only then that the un-invited guests left myself and my husband alone.

I was in shock at the speed and volume of people present at the birth of my son, not to mention devastated by the indents on both sides of his head from the forceps. I was told they would soon go. Nonsense, he still has them to this day.

I desperately needed a bath. I went into one of the bathrooms on the maternity ward, only to find it had not been cleaned from a previous birth. There was blood everywhere, the sink, the toilet, the bath and the floor. It was a shocking sight and made me want to run.

I took myself back to the ward and asked my husband to take me home as I needed to wash. I was told by staff that the bathrooms were not clean due to lack of staff and the hour being 6am. They advised me to rest a few hours and wait till cleaning staff arrived at 9am.

I cried and asked to please let me go home to which I was told I had a legal obligation to stay in hospital for 6 hours following the birth. I was appalled, exhausted, shocked and desperate to go home. After an hour I dismissed myself from the hospital and walked home.

Needless to say 2 years later when I became pregnant with my second child I insisted to the GP that I was having a home birth and she agreed it was much safer, much calmer and a much nicer experience. My GP supported me throughout my pregnancy and I had a wonderful experience with my husband at my side to see the birth of our second child."

Claire Dyble, mother-of-two, Norfolk

"This is a very powerful letter. I live in hope that the decision to remove the right for mothers to choose where they have their babies is revoked.

I haven't had the privilege of a home birth. Both of mine were delivered at the local hospital. As my first birth was so easy, I discussed home birth with my midwife, but was told that it wasn't a safe option, even though my first born arrived after 2 hours of labour with no medical intervention. She told me that it was more likely to be a quicker birth and therefore they would not have time to reach me if I needed assistance. By merely saying that statement, she was placing doubt in my mind. This however, was in the days before I had access to the internet, and knew nobody to speak with that had previously had a home birth. I decided to go into hospital out of fear!!

My second baby was induced as I was told that he was 14 days over and that he had to be born that day to avoid potential 'complication'!! He was 'booked' into the system. I had a traumatic birth as my body didn't build up gradually to giving birth. Being induced was very different to naturally having a baby. He wasn't ready. He became so distressed that his cord was wrapped around his neck, chest and legs. His heart rate slowed, and thankfully, I gave birth what appeared to be, 'just in time'.....was it the false environment, drugs and stress that created the risk?? Who knows? I almost gave birth amongst several strangers on a ward and was made to feel like his big brother 'shouldn't' be there!! Denied to go home when I wanted, to embrace my new born in the surroundings of our family home, have a cup of tea when I wanted, have visitors when I wanted, even feel at ease or comfort whilst giving birth!! I give my permission for you to use this should you wish to. I would also join others in protest against this unfair decision."

Cate Oliver, mother-of-three, Norfolk

"Paula thank you so much for sharing. I borrowed money to get an independent midwife for my home vbac and I felt like a wuss for not fighting for my rights on the NHS. A friend in the next London borough along had a home vbac shortly before so I knew it had been done outside of independent practice. I am so glad it is not just me who put my energies elsewhere! It is after all the services who should meet the client's needs and not the other way round."

Barbara Hazelwood, mother, Norfolk

"I have been thinking of giving birth as a primal or core choice like the vote, or sexuality ... and to take that choice away is soul destroying and a massive step backwards not just for home-birthers and their babies, but for women as a whole, for men, for families, for professional midwives, for health care professionals and the industry en masse and for the policy makers whose words aren't worth a penny if not respected and upheld...."

Dawn Styles, mother-of-four, and childminder, Cambridgeshire

"After three fairly traumatic hospital births I wanted to experience a home birth with number four, even though I was advised against it by my consultant. My midwife was 100% supportive and made sure I was able to have the amazing birth I had dreamed of. My older three children were part of the whole experience and along with my wonderful husband and fabulous doula, I experienced the most amazing birth. I am extremely grateful for this. "

Vinny Styles, father-of-four, Cambridgeshire

"Having our last baby at home was the most moving experience of my life, welcoming a new life into our family with his brothers and sisters around him added a family bond and shared experience that would not have been possible in a hospital setting. Homebirths should be encouraged rather than be denied as they have been."

Laura Wingfield, mother-of-three, Midlands

"I have three children, three home births, and I know my experience would have been a whole lot different had I been in hospital. I was admitted briefly to the labour ward as I was unwell when I was carrying my first child and found the experience so alienating and distressing that I could not contemplate going back there when it was time to give birth. I am now a passionate supporter of home birth, having had three beautiful and amazing experiences with my family by my side. My community midwife, who was thrilled to be present at the home water birth of my third child, said to me afterwards that this is how birth should be. She also was able to congratulate my parents on their new grandchild and my children on their new sibling. It was a truly wonderful experience and I feel deeply saddened to hear that not all women have this option. Every woman should have the choice to experience birth the way I did."

Bella, mother-of-three, Cambridgeshire

"Having a home birth with my youngest daughter was the most empowering experience ever, I was able to tell exactly what was happening at every step of the way, and the midwife confirmed it. My privacy, and me being in control was totally respected, my daughter was able to be born exactly when she wanted, her birth was the mirror of her essence, it was such an overwhelming, empowering and spiritual experience (even the outside weather mirrored the state of the labour) I just could not wait to do it all over again. This birth so undisturbed was the base of a perfect breastfeeding and natural childhood and an incredible bond. How can this be denied to any mother and father wishing for it? Thanks for fighting for this."

Khadijah, mother-of-seven, Cambridgeshire

"It took until number 7 for us to have a homebirth. 2 of the not-homebirths particularly haunt me (third child homebirth was banned in our area, fourth the person on the phone refused to send a midwife, and I didn't want an unassisted birth). In the end it felt so normal and ordinary to have our seventh born into the humdrum of daily life, and her Daddy called in her Grandma and 6 curious siblings to see her before the cord was cut. Our children will all remember their Mummy wandering around the house for a few hours, resting, breathing deeply, before cosying into a darker room to quietly welcome a baby. Not ecstatic. Blissfully normal. Deeply peaceful and familiar. Like being at home: in every sense of the word."

Linda Quinn, doula and Co-Founder of Developing Doulas

"Well done Paula"

Staci Sylvan, mother-of-two, birth and postnatal doula at Doula Passion and Breastfeeding Counsellor

"Powerful - Can I share with my birth group?"

Diane Walters, doula, Birth Wisdom

"Brilliant. Thank you for sharing this"

Beverley Gazy, mother, doula at Birth Your Way, Hypnobirthing Instructor

"Please allow me to share a few paragraphs with my local home birth Paula. It's an amazing letter"

Angie Griffiss-Williams, mother-of-three (all born at home)

"I wholeheartedly agree with your points. I'm pleased to say that in our area, home birth is becoming far more widely accepted. Our first homebirth was a fight - by the third, they were actively supporting us, and now that my sister is pregnant, the team is positively encouraging home birth - even for first time births!"

Megan Sutherland, mother-of-four and Herbalist, Lincolnshire

"Beautiful, powerful words - thank you"

Anne Harper, mother and doula at New Era Doula Support

"Paula, may I share some of this anonymously in our local home birth group? I feel many of your words could be my own"

Wendy Evans, freebirthing mother

"Sounds completely logical and well thought out to me. Gives me goose bumps actually! Would be well worth sending to your MP too I'm sure!"

GC, mother-of-three, who has had a homebirth previously in West Norfolk

"Wow! Your letter is dynamite!! I support you wholeheartedly. We live in a society of fear and an expectation to conform. It is an abomination that women are being controlled where they can birth their babies and being bullied into this with the support being taken away, support that should be available to every woman, wherever women choose to birth"

Samantha Booth, mother

"What a well-written, coherent and complete argument. Second Wendy Evans saying to send it to your MP too. There is a requirement to support home births, isn't there?"

Laura Sturdy, mother and Doula, founder of Holistic Mama

"WOW this is fantastic Paula!"

Hannah Brewer, mother

"Midwives and doctors refuse to act in accordance with their own professional codes and bully/intimidate to coerce women who try and exercise informed choice.... well done for writing it - it must have been hard to do but we need to stand up and make our voices heard"

Wendy W

"Wow an absolutely fantastic depiction of the 'battle' that so many birthing women seem to face today. Stunningly written"

Emi Ralph, mother-of-three (one freebirth), Midlands

"GO MAMA!"

Chris Katie Hayden Hopkins, mother

"I had my son (only) at home in 2008. The birth was the single most contented, euphoric and perfect moment in my life thus far and has undoubtedly been the foundations to a contented mothering journey - home birth all the way!"

Lauren Seddon-Roberts, mother, doula

"Spot on"

Hannah Ashford, mother

"Brilliant!"

Kirstie Wood, mother-of-two, who was herself born at QEH

"Wow, brilliant! This campaign means a lot because I was born at Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn"

Joanna Joy, mother-of-two (both freebirthed and supported in this birth choice by Bradford NHS Homebirth Team)

"Fab !! - Get it sent. Copy in everyone you can think of - MPs, SOMs, hospital big wigs, your local GPs etc.... they all need to hear this "

Kim Forster, mother

"Hi Paula, I could only read to half way as I was getting so angry as you said you have been too. Now I will just have to share that I have had two hospital births and one home birth. If the hospital staff had their way I would have gone to hospital for my daughter. I knew better and insisted that I would stay at home. I ended up having a natural birth with no midwife there. Thank God. The worst part was when the midwives did arrive and one of them started to keep pushing my daughter onto my breast to feed.....give her a chance to rest hey! Well there is more to my birth story than that as there is with every woman. I avoided another traumatic hospital experience this time but I had to be really strong and was in tears after each visit because I wouldn't do what the staff wanted."

Kate Palmer, mother, birth supporter

"Oh my god it's wonderful. Truly wonderful. And very powerful. I am just about to go to a birth with a lady who really needs to read this as she has been so strong in refusing their intervention and is now considering home water birth instead. Love it so much. Thank you for sharing it!"

Kaz, mother-to-be

"Paula Cleary I am currently writing a sheet in addition to my birth plan. It will outline all my reasons behind my birthing decisions including the decision to home birth, in case my midwife starts questioning my decisions. Do you mind if I effectively steal bits from this letter to use on my sheet?"

Hollie-flower Hanson Evans , mother-of-one-

"I can honestly say my heart 'broke' when I was told I couldn't have my baby at home, never the less she arrived in hospital & I would've been happy to labour anywhere on the planet to have her here with us"

Laura Beeton, mother-of-two

"I fought to have a homebirth with my second baby as my first child was born in just under 3 hours. My midwives advised me against having a home birth as my iron count was very very slightly low. One midwife put up so many obstacles for me and made me feel really scared about having a homebirth but I stuck to my guns and had my little girl at home. She was born in just over an hour, from first contraction to being in my arms, and it was the perfect birth. Even my midwife was surprised at how easy it was and she agreed that I would never had made it to the hospital. I was so relaxed and my little boy was able to be with me through out. Then I got up and had a cup of tea and a shower and we all snuggled as a family at home. Homebirths are the best."

Sandra Tahzima, mother-of-one, Nottinghamshire

"I live in Nottingham. When I was pregnant, my midwife was almost begging me to have a home birth! I was really pleased they offered, although it was my first and I guess fear of the unknown made me decide to have my baby in hospital. I had a great hospital experience (unlike some) but I'm pleased I had the choice. All mothers should have the right to choose, they should not have to worry about what area they live in and if their local authority supports home birth."

Sandra's thoughts after reading Birthplace Matters:

"It totally affirmed the need for choice for mothers not just in your area, but nationwide. I hope the ripples turn into a whirlpool and shake up a system that is quite clearly failing!"

Katy Templeman, in response to the letter as published in Juno magazine

"I had a great 1st delivery in a birth centre with just midwives, but with my second the birth centre was full so I had to go to hospital, after being given the wrong advice (go home not dilated enough and not in enough pain). I gave birth to my second baby in the car. I am going nowhere next time! They can all come to me! I will definitely be opting for a home birth. My husband had to deliver my daughter, so I am sure he could do it again if he had to. You are welcome to use my story as to why home birth MUST be an option, I do not recommend giving birth in the car although I am actually glad I didn't give birth in the hospital where no one could interfere! Thank you for supporting the right for home births for women, I really hope you are successful in getting the policy changed"

Dannielle Peta Wheeler, mother-of-two, Cambridgeshire

"Home birthing is a natural, normal part of home life. It allowed my eldest to be a part of his brothers delivery and those first precious minutes and hours after birth.."

Maggie Luuka, mother-of-two

"I've had two beautiful water births at home and could not even imagine giving birth anywhere else. I truly hope that women will always have an option to give birth at home if they so wish, as there is no other place as relaxing and familiar and safe as one's home."

Joni Lawless, mother and freebirther

"I love this. Massive support for you and your message here"

Amanda Smith, mother

"This is wonderful!"

Eva Hadert – mother-of-three

"I have had two home births, one hospital. The home births were much more relaxed, the midwife gave us her undivided attention (which I didn't have at my 1st birth in hospital). Family could come over. One of the best feelings was having my own bath and bed straight afterwards. All women should have the right to have their babies in their own environment."

Yolanda Forster, mother-of-two, peer supporter, Durham

"We need a service which is confident that it can address the needs of all women and babies. Maternity services is now stripped of its assets by politicians and bean counters who can see its cost but not its true value."

Sharon Raymond, mother-of-two, Cambridgeshire

Q “What exactly is being threatened Paula? Health authorities have a legal duty to provide emergency cover and midwives have a duty of care to attend a homebirth if the woman is refusing to go to hospital.”

Paula Cleary - mother-of-five and author of the letter, in response to the above

A “It isn't being threatened Sharon - it has been their official, 'we're not budging on this' stance for months. Not everyone feels confident or comfortable with either a planned or accidental freebirth as a result of refusing to go in.... women should not have to carry that stress around for nine whole months of wondering and waiting to find out only on the day 'will they or won't they come if I refuse to come to hospital?' or the bad feeling DURING their birth if midwives DO attend, unwillingly and bringing a bad energy with them, or having travelled from out of the area to do so... Leaving women labouring home alone for longer and potentially very scared. Is it right that women should even have to have that dilemma at all? Especially first timers?”

Janine L, mother

“Fantastic letter Paula”

Clare Moore, mother-of-three, Midlands

“Having a homebirth meant the whole family could share in the amazing experience and be part of the arrival of the newest member of our family. We wouldn't have had that option is hospital, my older children would have had to wait to meet their baby brother. It was a magical experience, and the bond between my oldest son and his baby brother is now so strong, they have a wonderful connection which I believe is due to him being a part of his birth. Don't take that opportunity away from other families.”

Marta Gil, mother-of-two

“Home is the place where the mum and family feel the safest, that's the place where the baby will live and develop. Institutionalizing the most important moment of life - the transition from mum's womb to the outside world should be allowed to happen in the warmth of the baby's home with the family. It's so important that mums feels safe, good and happy. So much in a child's future life depends on that - it's baby's first impression on the world. You never have the second chance to make that first impression. You can't do a second take of labour.”

Zoe Barras, mother-of-four, Sussex

“I don't live in your area Paula but here are my thoughts anyway. I was told I couldn't have a home birth for my second pregnancy, the midwife actually banged her head on the desk when I said I wanted to have my baby at home. I'd had to have my placenta manually removed after my first baby

was born, it was a horrific experience watching a nurse wrap the placenta cord around her arm and try and pull it out! I ended up having an epidural and being taken into theatre to have it removed. Very distressing especially given I was 17 years old. When I was pregnant again I found out that the drug used to "quicken" the placenta, I'm actually allergic to. I refused it with birth no 2, and told them I was NOT going in hospital. I had two wonderful midwives with me when my daughter was born in my own bed and my placenta arrived naturally after only 9 minutes. I had two further home births and I think I recovered quicker and also my husband was able to play a much more active part in the birth of his children. None of my children have ever been jealous of the new baby sibling because they awoke to them in their own home without mummy having to leave them behind and I'm sure that helped massively. I could go on for ages Paula, because I'm so happy to have had 3 home births although not all were as fab as the first one... Well done for all your positive work"

Caitlin Howells, mother-of-two, Norfolk

"I have had two home births with my two children, the first time supported by community midwives in Peckham, the second in Norfolk. I feel very glad and fortunate that I was able to have this choice, and, for my two straightforward pregnancies and births, it was a real comfort to be at home through the labour and post birth period. Both labours were extremely long, and I think I would have felt really stressed and under pressure had I been in hospital. The midwives, none of which I knew or had met before were fantastic, allowing me to labour in peace and without intrusion, but providing loving support when it was needed. They helped me take a bath after the birth and left us all tucked up in bed after working far beyond their shift times. I am in awe of the work they do"

Emily Maryan Green-Cooper, mother-of-two, Kent

"I was booked in for a home birth as I was and still am afraid of hospitals. It helped enormously to alleviate some of the panic I experienced in the months leading up to my due date. I believe that every woman should retain the right to this option, pregnant women are not sick, they are performing miracles and should be supported, if not encouraged to give birth in their own homes surrounded by their family and friends in their own "nests"."

Sara Waldron Dare, mother-of-two, West Sussex

"I believe that the main issue in this argument is about choice. If the alternative is not available then the lack of education surrounding that alternative will eventually influence decision-making, causing an even deeper and inaccurate social attitude towards home birthing. I also understand that the topic is a minefield from a political and economic point of view and a likely overstretched team of midwives are possibly being asked to make further cuts?? I don't know the details here. I am furious that a probable economic issue is influencing a woman's right to choose where they birth and can only hope that one day there may be the resources to allow any woman to give birth wherever she chooses safely. I was very lucky to home birth both of my children without complication in the company of 2 lovely midwives."

Dr. Rima Hussein, mother-of-four (4th baby freebirthed), University Lecturer

"Brilliant, this is very inspiring. Thank you Paula, for writing these words of deep truth"

Rebecca Blackman, mother

"This is scary! I hope it doesn't filter down to other areas. Here in mid-Suffolk, everyone is extremely supportive of homebirth and I encountered no disapproval when having my little boy at home in May. I'm not planning on having any more children, but if I did, I would want a home birth again and hope that choice is available to me."

Shirley Pretty, mother-of-3, 1 in hospital (very bad experience), 1 in a birthing unit (lovely experience) and 1 at home (amazing experience).

"Mums should be able to choose"

Fiona Willis, mother and doula, Somerset

"Peace on earth begins at birth"

Summerhaze S, mother

"Wow. This letter Paula is amazing. Hope it does some good."

Zita Lucia, mother and freebirther, UK

"Wow fantastic piece of writing, well done"

Jess Argh, mother-of-one, Australia

"Paula - homebirthing is amazing! Anyone who desires it should be free to do it!"

Kristie-Lennon May, mother-of-five (1 home birth, the 5th, that I had to fight for as I was classed as "high risk" for no reason other than it was my 5th child)

"I want to have a home birth if/when I have my last child, and am worried I will have an even bigger fight on my hands."

Angie Mullin, mother

"I've tagged my private midwife on the post on your page. She was single -handedly responsible for restoring my confidence in my body after a very traumatic hospital birth. Because of her, I got to experience the immense power that comes with having a home birth.

Without her I would have believed them when they said I 'couldn't' have a home birth because of where I live (a boat) and because of previous birth complications (all down to being in a hospital!)"

Shamim Malik, mother-of-three

"I love your article and completely agree with you. I'm a mum to 3, first one was a c section, second and 3rd VBACs, but unfortunately I was 'high risk' with a previous C-Section and gestational diabetes so wasn't allowed a home birth.. I really wanted a home birth for my 3rd as my hospital experiences were awful.

I had to argue with the midwife not to be strapped to a monitor and not have a probe inserted up me whilst I was fully dilated.

And after the birth I wanted the placenta to detach naturally, the nursing staff were clearly not happy with that, but I managed to avoid the jab for half an hour... Then I was told I'd have to go and have it surgically removed if it didn't happen soon... I was pressured into having the jab!! .

I can't understand why, going to the hospital is the default setting? The home is the most natural place for such a natural process."

Hannah Silvester, mother

"Brilliant. Well done"

Shauna Tate, mother

"My midwife in Thetford wasn't up for it first time round but then she delivered my daughter and was so pro HB with my 2nd! I had the senior midwife with my 2nd and she seemed off at first because I wanted hands off approach but soon got used to it and did well!".... I'm Norfolk Suffolk border and had some fantastic Suffolk midwives involved with my homebirth also met a doctor from West Suffolk who'd had his children born at home. I hope you get some more support"

Gemma Cressey, mother

"Wow this is great. I had my first at home in Northampton who have a fantastic home birth team and I am now pregnant with my second and do not feel I have the same support now I have moved to Suffolk... I am having a doula for extra support as well so I'm sure it will go fine. I think it's just my midwife that doesn't seem too fussed about it.... I'm hoping she just doesn't have as much experience in it and once she helps me deliver she will think different. I know home births and hypnobirthing are unusual in my area".

Joanne Hollis, mother

"This letter is fantastic, very well written. I hope it makes them sit up and listen. I am in Northampton too, I have had 2 births with the homebirth team here and they are amazing, we are so lucky, every county should have one"

Angela Manton – mother to four children: identical twins, and non-identical twins

"I don't have any experience of home birth to speak of having had both sets of twins in hospital. For me, it's simply about choice. Every woman should have the choice and feel OK to make the choice. There should be lots more information out there for everyone to make informed choices. Reflecting on my own situation I wish there had been other information and other opinions more readily available. You're doing a great job Paula"

Ashley M, mother

"Perfect".

Elle James, mother

"Great job, Paula"

Katherine Wenyon, mother

"This is wonderful, it resonates with me so much"

Emma Galvin – Commenting on the letter as published in Juno Magazine

"I had no idea this was happening in the UK. I'm utterly gobsmacked. I've planned for two homebirths, though only managed successfully with my second baby, and agree with everything Paula has written here. Fortunately for me, my midwives in Woolwich and Aylesbury Vale respectively were actively encouraging. I am strong minded and well informed about my choices but sadly I know too many women who have found themselves on the clinical conveyor belt, too terrified to question it."

Victoria M, mother

"Beautifully written".

Dawn Waddington, mother-of-four, Conwy, Wales

"I am shocked to learn an area in the UK does not provide a homebirth service! I gave birth in 2011 in Conwy County. I chose to have a freebirth due to a lack of support from my midwife, despite my

consultant giving me the go-ahead. Every woman should be entitled to a homebirth with positive support from a midwife. I actually thought that that was already stipulated in law."

Jo Barlow, mother-of-four (two homebirths), Surrey

"I cannot believe you are not 'allowed' a home birth at all anywhere in the UK in 2014! I had my 4th (2nd homebirth) in 2006 and was told at various points they may not have staff, and yes I also decided that there was no chance I was going to hospital and they would have to get to me, even if after the baby was born! If only - in this money controlled world - they would figure out that the complications and therefore cost of a homebirth must be so much lower than the almost 30% C-section rate at the local hospital, not forgetting the lesser stress and post trauma levels for both baby and mum, the health risks of antibiotics and all the rest... wake up people, home birth should be the norm unless there are clear reasons otherwise!"

Carly Green, mother-of-three, (one homebirth), East Devon

"Completely support you Paula. My last birth was planned to be at home, but due to staff shortages (and not nearly enough confidence in myself as a birthing goddess) I was shunted into hospital. Home birth should be the default option."

Ainara Solana, mother-of-three, Spain

"Home birth was wonderful for me. I had one assisted home birth and one unassisted homebirth. Both wonderful experiences (second one even better!). Oh, and one hospital birth that made me never want to do that again."

Kat B, mother

"What a fantastic letter"

Petra Q, mother -

"Well written!! Will you please update if you get an answer? Thank you."

Victoria Sibley, mother-of-one, nr Long Sutton, Lincolnshire

"I have a daughter and I can honestly say if it wasn't for the wonderful midwives and staff at Pilgrim Hospital, Boston, (in Lincolnshire) she wouldn't be here. I had an emergency C-section and major complications which resulted in my daughter being 6 weeks early - the cord was wrapped around her neck twice with a true knot in it and she was blue and not breathing when they took her out. She was immediately given air and spent her first few days in an incubator as she was unable to maintain her oxygen levels. My husband was included at her birth and spent the night going between SCBU and recovery where I was, so it was very traumatic for both of us, but the staff were amazing.

When I was finally able to visit my daughter the following day she was immediately taken out the incubator and placed on my chest under my nightie to have the skin contact we had missed when she was born. Altogether we spent 3 weeks in hospital and I felt that both I and my daughter received wonderful care. That said if I wanted to have a home birth and be told I couldn't I would feel angry at having the decision taken from me as unless you have a condition that is deemed too risky to give birth at home surely it is the mother's choice."

Zoe Lunt, mother

"I almost had a first home birth (very quick labour) but didn't even realise that it was allowed!!! How outrageous that sounds to me now! But I had no idea of my rights or choices at that time. Totally shocking!

The midwife actually called me a "drama queen" before examining me and realising I was fully dilated after just a few hours of labour. She then said I had to get straight to hospital but couldn't give me a lift (insurance reasons) and I couldn't drive so had to call my brother for a ride. By the time I arrived at hospital I was DESPERATE to deliver but the suite was occupied and I had to dance around waiting for a further half hour or so. It was unbearable, I will remember that always - literally crossing my legs - until the room came free and then my son was born. Within 10 minutes. Like a bullet from a gun!"

Beverley Cooke, mother-of-six

"Six babies here! Five hospital deliveries, mainly due to very high blood pressure which I agreed at the time was risky and I felt safer in hospital, particularly with no. 4. I was looked after by an amazing team of midwives though. With my first though (25 years ago) I was left alone and then given pethidine when I was screaming I wanted to push, of course the midwife didn't check and I was already ten centimetres dilated. My cervix, I have since discovered dilates very quickly from four or five centimetres! My 6th delivery was at home, delivered by one of my best friends who has been a midwife for 25 years. It was amazing. I was advised to go in to hospital but decided to take a very informed risk and my friend/midwife was fine with that. We decided that if my friend couldn't deliver our baby then we would go in to hospital, The birth, while hard work, was amazing, My midwife helped me to bathe and breastfeed after the birth and I got into a freshly made clean bed in my own home and stayed there all day with my husband and new baby, It was just magical, every woman who wants to have a home birth should at least be given the opportunity to explore if it's the right option for her and her choice respected."

Carly Todd, mother

"I've had two traumatic hospital births and now pregnant with 3rd and have to have another hospital birth because of medical reasons (blood disorder) absolutely gutted! I am dreading everything about it, especially the lack of control. I have no problem birthing and have quick labours, if it wasn't for risk to baby I would just stay home. Your article is so accurate, can't believe some women are not given a choice."

Susan Mary Reid, mother

"HBAC age 38, and it was the most awesome of things. Thanks so much for writing this, Paula!"

Sarah Taylor- Hughes, mother

"I have had two amazing home birth experiences (and another due in 6 weeks). We are in Bristol and I have to say, the care I received was faultless... I was initially refused a home birth with my first as it was too 'risky', simply because it was my first. However, this was a South Gloucestershire team. I moved over the Bristol boarder and was welcomed into the home birthing world during my first labour the amazing midwives just left me to trust my instincts. It was so empowering! Second time round was nearly an accidental free birth, the midwives arrived just in time to catch him. They cleaned up, made us a cuppa, congratulated us and left us to be a family... I feel lucky to have experienced the community midwives of Bristol! The midwives have again been very welcoming of home birth number 3 (although we are all unsure if they'll make it as I seem to labour quickly) 3 separate teams of midwives, I must add... our instincts during birth and parenting are crucial although so often women are often encouraged to fight them!"

Lizzie Tristem, mother

"My 1st birth was at home and is likely to have been the cause of the blood incompatibility that we had in my 2nd pregnancy. Firstly the midwife used cord traction to get the placenta out - the most likely cause of blood mixing & I had to go to hospital to get an anti-D shot which may have been too late or insufficient. Luckily my son survived his induction at 36wks, a blood transfusion and 2wks of severe jaundice without brain damage. Neither my midwives at home or in the hospital seemed to know much about natural birth - they knew loads about how it usually goes but not how it's supposed to work. So I'm torn. I guess I'm in favour of proper education for all birth attendants & the freedom of choice for women."

Hannah Postgate, mother-of-two

"Thank you Paula really heartfelt perspective. Both my children were born at home. Amazing and wonderful experiences. You share my thoughts on the page. Good luck."

Marnos Maggie, mother-of-three, Suffolk

"I have 3 children and had them all in hospital. My first delivery was an utter nightmare, very fast, uncaring staff and very heavy bleeding. Because of the bleeding with my first delivery I was placed in hospital 2 weeks prior to my second baby's birth just in case. My midwife was very concerned that with the distance needed to travel to hospital I may bleed to death before an ambulance even arrived, I live in rural Suffolk. The birth of my second child was an amazing experience, fast and supported by loving midwives. My third baby was due to be delivered at home, I was so excited and relived to be in my own home but, the weather was so terrible(January, snow storms) that the home birthing service had been cancelled?! We still had to then travel the 32 miles too hospital, in the snow and blizzard!!! Where they pumped me full of antibiotics because my waters had broken 24hrs before, hooked me up to machines, and worried me silly with their concern that my baby was too big

for me to deliver safely. I delivered hard and fast and was out of the hospital within 8 hrs.....my dreams of a home delivery shattered.”

Claire Fitter, mother, Birmingham -

“Birmingham Women's Hospital have recently set up a home birth team and they are actively promoting home birth within my area. They also organised a launch party where they invited healthcare professionals from other areas of the UK to try and promote the concept. I chose a home birth from the outset and couldn't have been better supported (and had an intervention free labour unlike my first birth in hospital) but the midwives are also trying to actively recruit women to give birth at home so at an antenatal appointment I was asked if I would like to give birth at home by a midwife who'd not seen my notes and realised that I'd chosen it already. It seems insane that policy differs so much throughout the UK! Maybe you could contact or include reference to the BWH home birth team as a group leading the way?”

Kelly Atkins, mother-of-three, Hertfordshire

“I live in Hertfordshire and am a mother of three, all birthed at home (first two with NHS and last one with an IM). The birth where I was clearly in charge from the beginning was the best one. Funny that!”

Georgie Morris, mother-of-two, Berkshire

“When I went for my first booking appointment with the midwife and mentioned I was thinking about a home birth she was totally supportive and in fact mentioned that they'd had some recent great success with the use of hypnobirthing. I went straight home, looked it up and immediately decided that I wished to do hypnobirthing. I was attended by one great midwife at home and a second came for the last phase of birthing to support as necessary. My waters didn't break and they didn't pressurize me to have them broken. My second stage was longer than they would have 'allowed' in hospital, but they trusted me and stayed beyond their shifts to allow me to give birth naturally. My second child was also born at home and the midwife and a trainee midwife mostly left me and my husband to get on with it. I had a birthing pool which I used in the final stage and gave birth with my son still in his sack. I cannot imagine what kind of birth I would have had in hospital. I just know I will be eternally grateful that I was able and allowed to remain at home with no stressful moving/car journeys/decisions about when to go to hospital. And that the NHS midwives were so supportive of my decision.”

Lisa Rusiecka, mother-of-two

“ How awful that this is happening in this day and age. I've had one hospital birth and one homebirth. I couldn't now imagine having to birth anywhere other than home. Will share this.”

Kate Palmer, mother

"So good! So true and so beautifully written!!!"

Rachel Leonard, mother

"Just perfect"

Lauren, mother and Birth Doula at Conscious Birth

"My homebirth (4th birth) changed me as a person, it was healing and life changing and in no way comparable to my 3 previous hospital births. To be able to birth in my own way in my own home completed me as a woman."

Susie Maguire, mother-of-one

"I had my little boy at home supported by 2 best friends, a gorgeous doula and 3 (yep 3) NHS midwives; one of whom had been my midwife throughout the pregnancy and one of whom was her trainee and was able to witness and entirely natural birth. I could not have asked for a more blissful experience. Amazing article and letter"

Clare Edwards, mother-of-two, Northants

"Every woman should have the right to give birth at home in a safe and comfortable environment and avoid the pressure of unnecessary medical intervention if that is their choice. I was so lucky to have 2 wonderful water births at home which would never have been possible without the support of this dedicated and passionate homebirth team in my county.

This article gives an idea of the service offered in South Northants which I found to be superb and a model which should be followed nationwide in my opinion.

https://www.nct.org.uk/sites/default/files/related_documents/Richley%20A%20joyful%20experience%20p11%20Sept%2011_0.pdf

Here is their current webpage:

<http://www.northamptongeneral.nhs.uk/OurServices/Clinical/ObstetricsandGynaecology/Maternity/HomeBirthTeam.aspx>

Sara Kulinich, mother-of-three, Tyne and Wear

"Great article. I had my first baby in hospital where I was frightened by the midwives into believing my birth could be problematic... the word "C-section" was thrown about. They made me lie in an uncomfortable semi-reclined position strapped to monitors for the duration of labour and they still had them on as my son was born. Incidentally, his pulse never rose above 140 the whole time - he was totally chilled coming out of me. I then had two homebirths and they were amazing! All on my

terms, birthing on all fours, as came naturally (also meant I did not tear). I was able to introduce siblings straight away, be cozier in my bed and breastfeeding my baby straight away. It definitely made for a better labour, birth and start to my babies' lives. For my 3rd baby I had a water birth and my partner caught her in his hands, which was just as I had planned it. Home births are more relaxing, as I felt I was in control of my own body and its natural functions. The environment is way more conducive to a positive birth experience."

Moira Owen, mother-of-three, Gloucestershire

"I live in Stroud, Gloucestershire and the midwives here are amazing. I had my first child in a birthing pool at the local maternity hospital, my 2nd and 3rd children were born in a birth pool at home. In this area homebirth is encouraged and supported by very experienced and knowledgeable midwives who go out of their way to make you feel safe and confident. My midwife was on call for me 24 hours a day and when I went overdue she would check in with me before heading out with her family just to make sure my labour was not likely to start whilst she was in a restaurant, at the cinema etc. I had the same midwife for all 3 of my pregnancies and built up a relationship based on trust. I was confident that my midwife knew me and I was able to relax knowing that she would pick up on and act as necessary if any concerns occurred during the birth. For me, my main reason for home birth was the need to know and trust my midwife and for her to know me. A hospital birth would have meant labouring and having my baby delivered with probably a midwife with whom I had no relationship or trust. I am eternally grateful for the choice I had in how and where my babies were born."

Suzanne Rose, mother-of-four

"Women should always have a choice regarding childbirth. I fought for my rights to a natural childbirth rather than an enforced C section with the QEH in 2004/05. I had previously had 3 C sections prior to that pregnancy, the last one being 1999. I researched the subject thoroughly with the National Childbirth Trust and found out that the chances of a scar rupturing during natural childbirth was lower than the chances of complications from another C section I didn't need !! However I faced massive opposition from 'old school' male gynaecologists who refused even a trial of labour and I quote said "If you want a natural birth I suggest you put yourself on a plane to America!" It took months of fighting and meetings with the head of midwifery and a new female gynaecologist before I got an agreement on a trial of labour!! Although my labour did end in a C section (which was due to an uncooperative cervix) I felt at least I had had the choice in the end. It's disgusting the NHS still dictate to women without any thought to a women's autonomy."

Ellie Cook, mother-of-two, and doula at Isis Doula

"If we identify as pro-choice, then that must include the accommodation of women's choices throughout her pregnancy and birth too."

Viki Osborn, mother-of-two

"I hope you don't mind me messaging you and adding my overwhelming support for what you are doing."

I have 2 amazing boys and both were born at home. I am beyond grateful that I had that choice. I am fortunate that I had both uncomplicated pregnancies and the option to birth at home -but it was always a no-brainer for me to birth in the privacy of my own home anyway.

For me, it was about having a peaceful environment where I could be in labour from start to finish - I did not have to rush to a unit or hospital whilst in the throes of labour - I could instead focus simply and joyously on bringing my child into the world in the comfort of my own surroundings, in a way that suited us and where I could really relax. Added to this was that I knew my midwife, she knew me, and I could feel safe. This I think is key! For both births I had no interventions or gas and air - I practiced hypnobirthing - and I can quite honestly say that with my second there was no pain. And it took less than 90 minutes. I went to bed in my own home and in the morning my eldest son was able to join us in bed for hugs, kisses and to sing "happy birth-day"!

I think it has become harder for mothers to have faith in their ability to birth beautifully for all sorts of reasons. But I know for sure that for me, a great part of the success of both my births was that I was relaxed, in one place, with a trusted midwife, not self-conscious, not medicalized, free to move, private and calm. I am so grateful that I had that choice!! Thank you for all the work you do and for supporting not only the mums and future mums but also the babies to have a peaceful and gentle start to their lives....it matters!!!

Thank you!"

Susie Maguire, mother

"I had my little boy at home supported by 2 best friends, a gorgeous doula and 3 (yep 3) NHS midwives; one of whom had been my midwife throughout the pregnancy and one of whom was her trainee and was able to witness an entirely natural birth. I could not have asked for a more blissful experience. Amazing article/letter."

Amy Em, mother

"I had a hospital birth with my first and an unplanned home birth with my second. I actually wanted a water birth at the hospital but never made it there. It was an amazing birth and was so glad to be at home in the end. The midwife who came was great and seemed to be very experienced in natural home birth. She let me do whatever I wanted. It was such a different experience with my first in hospital where I felt I had no control over anything and felt scared . When I was pregnant with my second the midwives were telling me to have a home birth, they were promoting them in my area. I never knew until reading this that it was different in other areas. Having experienced both I would never have a hospital birth again. I agree with the person that said home birth should be the default and hospital only for those who need it."

Tracy Oldfield, mother

"Continuity of care, by skilled midwives in the first instance as the experts in normal pregnancy, should be the gold standard, regardless of where the mother chooses to give birth. That's what improves safety for mothers and babies."

Mandy Williams, mother-of-six, Cambridgeshire

"Hi I have six children, two hospital births (first and second) and four home births.

There is no comparison between the two experiences.

Had I been given the choice all would have been born at home. My home births were swifter and required no stitches, the babies born at home had no issues and were more settled with feeding and sleep. Home birth also beneficial to siblings as they felt part of and not abandoned due to new baby so family bonded better. I understand it isn't for everybody but choice ultimately important!

Child birth is the most natural thing in the world and should be in your natural environment."

Belinda Perkins, mother

"I keenly wanted to have my baby at home, however hospital was the best for us, as a single mother I had meals cooked for a few days, and great help getting breastfeeding established with my premature baby. However, I was truly mismanaged with my stillbirth in hospital and wish I would have been "allowed" to have her at home. That would have been so much less distress to my son as well as to me, his life will always be affected by the unnecessary separation of hospitalisation. Choice, choice, choice."

Karen Rogers, mother-of-two

"Dear Paula,

I have two daughters; both booked for home birth. The first I had to have in hospital after my labour stopped at home but our midwife crucially came with us and the second was born at home. In both cases the support of community midwife Gillan Pett, and her colleagues was invaluable. Indeed I would go so far as to say that without it, I doubt I would have the close and loving relationship that I have with my daughters.

The hospital staff at the Rosie, especially the obstetricians were truly awful. I am sorry to have to say this, but it is the case; they made me feel like a thing, at best something with a malfunctioning brain, at worst something without one at all. I have never felt so vulnerable in my life as the day before our first daughter was born and I will never forget it. A friend had a similar hospital birth story but without the midwifery support. Her relationship with her son has always been very difficult and it all started with the fear she felt resulting in difficulties with bonding.

I consider Gillian to be an honorary part of our family; she made me feel safe and a human being in a situation in which without this I would have been wiped out emotionally. I have no doubt at all that this would have seriously affected my relationship with my daughter.

Community midwives are in my experience radically different in their approach from hospital midwives and obstetricians; compassionate and competent but above all wise enough to know when to intervene and when to hold back and crucially always treating you as a person not a problem.

Preservation of a community midwifery service and of the option for home birth is a crucial human rights issue."

Barb Sheppard, mother

"In 1958, after a distressing stay in hospital for the birth of her child, Sally Willington aimed to publish a letter in a newspaper, asking if other women had shared her unhappy experience.

She wrote that, 'In hospital, as a matter of course presumably, mothers put up with loneliness, lack of sympathy, lack of privacy, lack of consideration, poor food, unlikely visiting hours, callousness, regimentation, lack of instruction, lack of rest, deprivation of the new baby, stupidly rigid routines, rudeness, a complete disregard of mental care or the personality of the mother.'

Childbirth was still taboo in the 1950s and it was more than a year later, on 1st April 1960, that her letter was eventually published in The Observer. The response, once it did appear, gave rise to a new voluntary organisation, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Pregnant Women, renamed in 1960 the Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services (AIMS)."

<http://www.historyandpolicy.org/.../choice-policy-and... ..>

Sally Willington's plea empowered many women to reclaim birth..... I hope your plea for homebirth helps to change the current culture of fear surrounding what should be a joyous experience.

A final word.....

Pete Cleary, father-of-five and husband of the author of the original letter has one last thing to say.....

“Dear homebirth policy-makers,

I have had the pleasure of being at and supporting my wife during all five of my children's births. We have been blessed in that all our children have been born naturally with my beautiful wife working her mother magic and birthing the natural way without the need for medical intervention.

Our first child was born in hospital, however we had planned and prepared for a home birth, which appeared to be supported by our local midwifery team. However after 13 years, I still feel duped into having him at the hospital.

On the day of his birth we contacted the midwifery team to tell them we were in labour. They used our inexperience of what stage we were at within labour to advise us to come in for a check-up, after we rang several times and no-one seemed to want to come out. On arrival at the hospital, my wife was 7cm dilated and we were advised that we were now too far gone to return home and should stay in. As first timers we did not have the conviction or confidence to follow our plan and lost our voice, a more supportive homebirth centric team or doula would have been a godsend and no doubt changed our history.

The next two births were beautiful home births fully supported and attended by an excellent midwifery team. It was at these births that I learnt how to support and provide all my wife's needs through labour.

We had moved to a new part of the country and our fourth birth was an uphill battle to get the home birth we wanted and deserved. Our local GP surgery advised us that birthing at home was dangerous

and not advised. My wife was grilled by the midwifery team on our birth plan and use of supporting natural remedies and herbs. However the midwifery team did support us in a home birth. When the day arrived only one midwife arrived in time, she was flustered and was asking us to wait for her colleague before birthing. At this time we were strong and confident in our way of birth and proceeded to have a beautiful birth despite this unneeded energy.

By the time of our fifth birth the local midwifery team had stopped providing home births in our area. The midwife services had been reduced since our last child, they now had a larger geographical area to cover with less staff. The local GP surgery remained resolute in their opposition to homebirth. We did have our birth at home, surrounded by all our children who witnessed the most magic event of their young lives, but not with the assistance of the local midwifery team.

I believe that our NHS is a pillar of our society and the job it provides is amazing and worth fighting for. The conditions that it is working under of increasing patients, decreasing funding and requests for more varied treatments is thrusting it headlong into a tipping point in the wrong direction. The erosion of the NHS by all political parties is not condonable.

Our society is built on freedom, the freedom of speech and of choice. It is underpinned by our basic human rights. We all pay into a group collective to support those freedoms and rights. We are standing by and witnessing them being eroded away by centralised governments in exchange for global conglomerates, pharmaceutical, petrochemical, military, that look for self-profit.

Birth is not a disease, not a wound, not an incident that needs treatment. It is a natural process that thrives with support and assistance. Assistance that should be given in an environment best suited to individual. It should be the choice and right of the individual where that occurs and the duty of the state to provide that in any way possible. Should medical intervention be required then this should be supplied but not be the first and only solution in cases that do not need it.

The option for home birth in my area has been removed because of government policy and funding. The knowledge at my local GP surgery around the success of home birth and the use of natural remedies in birth has been tainted by pharmaceutical companies touting their own products and solutions.

Too many entries and exits in this world are marred by disrespect, where individuals are patronised or marginalised. Birth and death are universal and basic human rights that should be provided for in a loving and respectful way. Our society should always strive to improve our support at these moments in life."

A Summary of the Birthplace Study, by Beverley Beech, Chair AIMS (UK)

The Advantages and Safety of Home Birth

The BirthPlace study revealed that the most dangerous place for a low risk woman to have a baby is a large, centralised obstetric unit, as the following tables show:

The following table gives the numbers of babies who have adverse outcomes for low-risk women expecting second or subsequent babies (per 1,000 births):

Obstetric unit	3.3
Home birth	2.3
Free-standing midwifery unit	2.7
Alongside midwifery unit	2.4

The study also looked at the way these babies were born and showed higher rates of spontaneous vaginal births when babies were born outside consultant units and lower rates of caesarean births.

Spontaneous vertex (head down) birth for low-risk women per 100 births:

Obstetric unit	73.8
Home	92.0
Freestanding midwifery unit	90.7
Alongside midwifery unit	85.9

Caesarean Section for low-risk women per 100 births:

Obstetric unit	11.1
Home	2.1
Freestanding midwifery unit	3.5
Alongside midwifery unit	4.4

It is clear that the most appropriate care for the majority of fit and healthy women is to provide a free standing midwifery unit and a case-load community midwifery service. This not only provides safer care, but it also saves the Trust a considerable amount of money

The Birthplace Cohort Study also published the average costs of birth in the settings available in the UK. It shows that a planned home birth is cheaper than any other option.

“On average, costs per birth were highest for planned obstetric unit births and lowest for planned home births. Average costs were as follows:

£1631 for a planned birth in an obstetric unit

£1461 for a planned birth in an alongside midwifery unit (AMU)

£1435 for a planned birth in a freestanding midwifery unit (FMU)

£1067 for a planned home birth”

If, instead of sending out two midwives to every home birth the hospital ensured that the second midwife was a student not only would the costs reduce further, but they could also begin to develop a cohort of midwives who are confident at attending home births and who will then see normal, straightforward, births. Each Caesarean section costs £2,579 compared with £1,174 for a normal midwifery-led birth.

The caesarean section rate in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kings Lynn is 26%*, whilst the World Health Organisation has pointed out that there is no health improvement for women or babies when the caesarean section rates exceed 10%. The caesarean section rate would be considerably reduced if the Trust establishes a free-standing midwifery unit and a community based case-load midwifery service.

For further information see <http://www.m4m.org.uk/> A midwife for me and my baby

References:

Birthplace Study

Birthplace in England Collaborative Group (2011) Perinatal and maternal outcomes by planned place of birth for healthy women with low risk pregnancies: the Birthplace in England national prospective cohort study, British Medical Journal, 343:d7400 doi: 10.1136/bmj.d7400

*Caesarean Statistics for Queen Elizabeth Hospital, 2013:

<http://www.birthchoiceuk.com/Professionals/BirthChoiceUKFrame.htm?http://www.birthchoiceuk.com/Professionals/statistics.htm>

Further reading

Am I allowed?	AIMS
New Active Birth	Janet Balaskas
The Baby's Coming	Virginia Howes
Birth Space, Safe Place	Adela Stockton
Birth Crisis	Sheila Kitzinger
The Heart in the Womb	Dr. Amali Lokugamage
Sensitive Midwifery	Caroline Flint
The Father's Homebirth Book	Leah Hazard
Birth Matters	Ina May Gaskin
When survivors give birth	Penny Simkin
Birth Rediscovered	Sheila Kitzinger
Gentle birth, Gentle Mothering	Dr. Sarah Buckley

Websites

<http://www.aims.org.uk/>

www.birthtraumaassociation.org.uk/

www.adelastocktoncounselling.net

www.homebirth.org.uk/

<http://www.birthrights.org.uk/>

<http://homebirthersandhopefuls.com/>

<http://www.birthchoiceuk.com/>

<http://www.nct.org.uk/birth-topics/home-birth>

<http://www.oneworldbirth.net/>

[Clickable link to the official page for Birmingham South Central CCG Homebirth Service Relaunch](#)