



Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust information leaflet

Women and children's services – improving care

The local NHS is improving the way it cares for women and children with new services providing a wider choice of individualised and expert care for all the patients it sees.

These important improvements will help ensure over half a million people throughout the south of West Kent and north East Sussex continue to be seen by the most highly skilled and expert hospital doctors, midwives and other healthcare professionals in the future.

The changes will also help enhance one-to-one patient care, helping the NHS provide patients with a more individual service which is more personal to their needs, and capable of achieving better outcomes whether they choose to be cared for at home, in the community or in hospital.

Women and children's care is provided by a huge team of experts including paediatricians, obstetricians, gynaecologists, GPs, midwives and healthcare visitors. These experts provide more complex care for patients at both Maidstone Hospital and Pembury Hospital.

In recent years, positive changes to hospital care have included a reduction in doctors working hours to better safeguard patients; a wider choice of services that better meet patients' individual needs; and more one-to-one care provided by highly skilled and experienced healthcare professionals.

As these new standards of care and better medical practices have been achieved nationally, however, both Maidstone and Pembury hospitals have found it increasingly difficult to maintain these higher standards and introduce new choices in the way women and children are seen.

The reduction in hospital doctors' hours has improved safety, but created a shortage of highly skilled clinicians in both hospitals. The problem is particularly acute in paediatrics – children's care - where there are insufficient numbers of middle-grade children's doctors nationally. The hospitals face similar challenges in obstetrics and gynaecology too.

At the same time, because the specialist staff needed to provide this complex care are spread across both hospitals, some middle-grade doctors do not see the wide range of cases they need to progress. This is harmful to their training, slowing down the time it takes them to gain the experience they need to help patients.

Both hospitals have looked at different ways to ensure patients are seen by the same highly skilled and experienced doctors, but now rely on short-term solutions to keep standards high. All too often they rely on agency doctors and have temporary permission not to reduce some doctors' working hours. This is not sustainable or good for patient care.



Since as early as 2001 the hospitals' most senior clinicians in women and children's care recognised that they would struggle to maintain these higher standards of care for patients with services and expertise spread over two sites.

In response, they developed a plan to better meet their patients' needs. This involved creating a single centre of expertise for complex women and children's care at either Maidstone Hospital or Pembury Hospital. Pembury was chosen for the centre because unlike Maidstone, it has no other nearby hospitals providing maternity and children's care, and is the closest option for the most possible patients.

The same clinicians continue to believe a single centre will allow them to make the very best use of their skills, experience and time for all the women and children they see. The changes were consulted on publicly in 2001, again in 2004 and were subsequently agreed locally by the NHS and a health committee made up of Kent and East Sussex County Councils in 2005.

Since then a new £225 million hospital has been built at Pembury with a women and children's centre for the whole of the south of West Kent and north of East Sussex. The new women and children's centre opens fully in July 2011.

Once open, the centre will provide all complex maternity services and children's inpatient services for the entire area. Although Maidstone Hospital's maternity department and children's ward will close women in Maidstone will continue to have all of their antenatal and postnatal care at Maidstone Hospital. They will also still be able to choose to give birth at home, in a new home-away-from-home midwifery-led birthing unit near Maidstone Hospital, or at the new hospital at Pembury.

While very safe, homebirths and midwife-led births at the home-from-home unit are for low risk pregnancies only. Most women will have their babies, if they choose, at the new centre of expertise for women and children's care at Pembury.

Children in Maidstone will continue to have their day case procedures at Maidstone Hospital and outpatient appointments there too. All complex inpatient care will be provided at the purpose-built centre of expertise, in the new hospital at Pembury.

By combining the skills and expertise of the healthcare professionals in one centre, patients will have access to a wider choice of clinicians who are better able to provide them with higher standards of care. The local NHS will also be able to provide more one-to-one care by treating patients in the right place, with the right care that best meets their needs.



Implementation and involvement

The improvements to women and children's services were jointly agreed by the local NHS and Kent and East Sussex County Councils in 2005. A new hospital has now been built at Pembury with a dedicated centre for women and children's care as part of a £225 million development. Both fully open in July 2011.

The improvements were reviewed for a second time by Kent County Council in 2010. The county council set up a task and review group to look at the changes. After a two-month detailed review, members of the group supported the need for change and improvements to patient care.

The changes were referred to the Secretary of State for Health and the national Independent Reconfiguration Panel (IRP) for further review. In June 2010 the Health Secretary and IRP said the changes should be implemented with the full engagement and involvement of NHS staff, local communities, GPs, patient groups and local councils.

The local NHS will be closely involving all of these important groups and individuals during the implementation of the changes to improve patient care. We will be sending a progress report on this work to the Health Secretary later this summer.

Staying in touch

If you would like to know more about the planned changes to women and children's services please email twohospitalsonefuture@nhs.net or call 01622 225859.