

Royal College of Psychiatrists' briefing

Spotlight on: Access to perinatal services and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic



July 2021

This briefing turns the spotlight on to one of the new indicators now available on the College's Mental Health Watch website. The expansion of perinatal mental health services that was initiated in 2016 has been widely seen as one of the shining lights in the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health and remains an integral element in the delivery of the NHS Long Term Plan to 2023/24.

The pandemic has adversely impacted the delivery of a significant range of health services over the past year and the latest data on access to specialist community perinatal mental health services illustrates that this is not an exception to the rule. This briefing will therefore consider the scale of the challenge ahead to ensure the programme can recover lost ground in the coming years and the regional variation in performance.

How is progress tracked for perinatal mental health access?

Access to specialist community perinatal mental health services is reported in two ways: the total number of women accessing services on a rolling twelve-month basis; and as a percentage of total births again on a rolling period of a year.

The baseline for the former is the 12,000 women estimated to have accessed such services in 2014/15, prior to the implementation of NHS England's Five Year Forward View for Mental Health. In relation to the latter, the percentage is calculated based upon the total number of births reported by the Office for National Statistics in 2016. The number of women in contact with services includes women who had at least one attended contact or contact through video consultation.¹

For the 2019/20 financial year the expectation was that 32,000 women would access specialist community perinatal mental health services or 20,000 above that initial baseline. This was then intended to increase to 47,000 in 2020/21, with the NHS Mental Health Implementation Plan to support delivery of the mental health elements of the broader NHS Long Term Plan confirming this higher level of expectation.² In percentage terms, there is an expectation that the women accessing such services represent at least 4.5% of those responsible for total births in 2019/20, rising to 7.1% in 2020/21.³

What was the state of play before the pandemic?

In the 2019/20 year as a whole, 30,625 women accessed perinatal mental health services, which was reported by NHS England as representing 4.6% of total births. This percentage was above the national expectation for the year, which was set at 4.5%. It however needs to be noted that this masks substantial variation in access rates across the country.

Published data from NHSE has been adjusted to account for the new clinical commissioning group (CCG) boundaries as of April 2020. While the national expectation was met overall, slightly below half of CCG areas (63 of 135 or 46.7%) actually posted performance at the 4.5%

¹ NHS England, NHS Mental Health Dashboard, Q3 2020/21, 13 May 2021. Available online: [NHS England » NHS Mental Health Dashboard](#) [Accessed on 28 June 2021]

² NHS England, NHS Mental Health Implementation Plan 2019/20 – 2023/24. July 2019. Available online: [NHS Mental Health Implementation Plan 2019/20 – 2023/24 \(longtermplan.nhs.uk\)](#) [Accessed on 28 June 2021]

³ NHS England, NHS Mental Health Dashboard, Q3 2020/21, 13 May 2021. Available online: [NHS England » NHS Mental Health Dashboard](#) [Accessed on 28 June 2021]

mark or above. 12 CCGs had already achieved the access rate expected in 2020/21 of 7.1%, three of which had a rate of 10.7% or above:

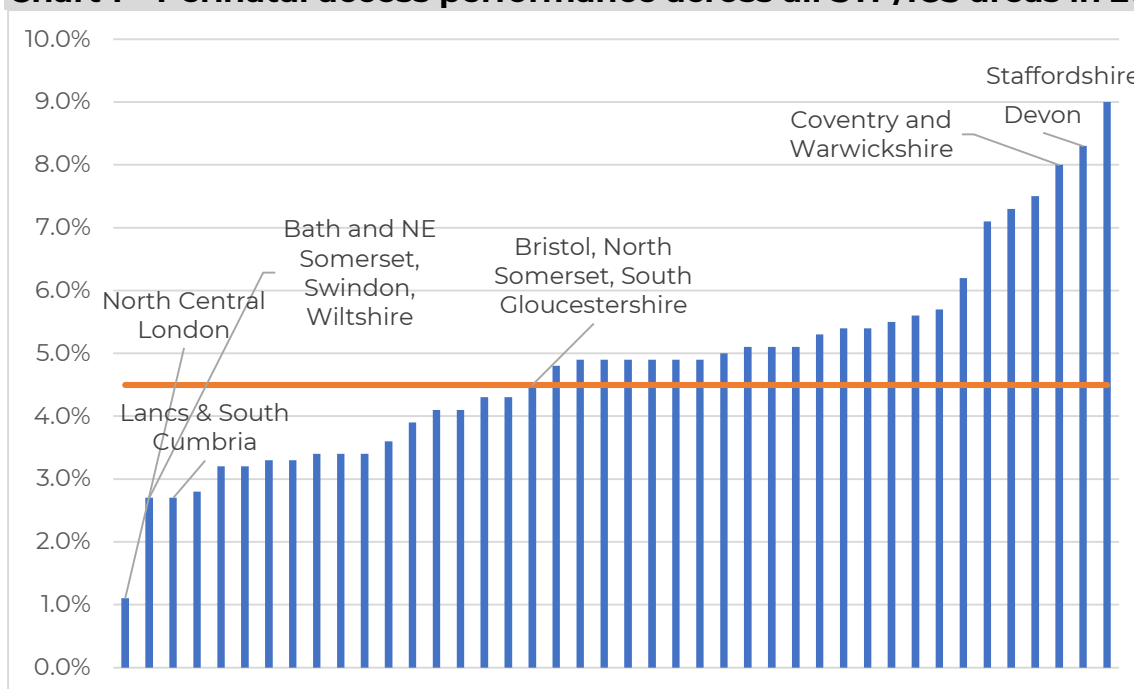
1. NHS Stafford and Surrounds CCG (12.7%)
2. NHS South Warwickshire CCG (12.0%)
3. NHS Stoke on Trent CCG (10.7%)

At the other end of the scale, 20 CCGs (14.8%) reported access rates below 3.0% for 2019/20 with the three areas reporting the lowest rates listed below:

1. NHS North Central London CCG (1.1%)
2. NHS Blackburn with Darwen CCG (1.4%)
3. NHS West Lancashire CCG (1.5%)

If the lens is focused instead on Sustainability and Transformation Partnership (STP) footprints then performance ranged from 1.1% (North Central London again) to 9.0% (Staffordshire), with 25 of 42 STPs (59.5%) meeting the 4.5% expectation level. Chart 1 below illustrates the full range of performance across STP areas in 2019/20.

Chart 1 – Perinatal access performance across all STP/ICS areas in 2019/20



What difference has the pandemic made to performance?

In the calendar year of 2020, 31,261 women accessed perinatal services against the enhanced expectation that 47,000 women would be able to access such care over the 2020/21 financial year. This is equivalent to 4.7% of women responsible for total births.

Only 12 of 135 CCG areas were meeting the 7.1% expectation for 2020/21 in this most recent data, with a further 8 posting performance of between 6.5% and 7.0% and realistically in a position to meet the expectation for the financial year when later data is made available.

Of the 12 highlighted above, only 6 of these CCGs were also meeting the 7.1% expectation ahead of schedule at the end of 2019/20. These do however include the five top performing areas:

1. NHS West London CCG – 10.2%
2. NHS Stafford and Surrounds CCG – 9.9%

3. NHS South Warwickshire CCG – 9.1%
4. NHS Blackpool CCG – 8.8%
5. NHS Cannock Chase CCG – 8.6%

At the other end of the scale, 22 CCGs (16.3%) posted performance of below 3.5%, with 8 of the 12 worst performing areas being the same in the 2020 calendar year and 2019/20 financial year. This includes the lowest four:

1. NHS North Central London CCG – 0.7%
2. NHS Leicester City CCG – 1.5%
3. NHS Blackburn with Darwen CCG and NHS North East Hampshire and Farnham CCG – 2.3%

While access rates improved in 26 of the 42 STP areas in the calendar year 2020 compared to the calendar year 2019, those improvements were not on the scale required to place the vast majority of areas on course to meet the original expectations for 2020/21. In 12 of those 26 areas seeing some improvement to access rates, the increase was less than one percentage point. Shropshire and Telford & Wrekin was the area attaining the largest year-on-year improvement, of 3.8 percentage points and bringing access up from 1.8% to 5.6%.

It also has to be noted that the only two areas meeting the expectation as of Q3 (Coventry and Warwickshire and Staffordshire, both reporting access rates of 7.2%) had actually posted a decline in performance compared to the previous twelve months. Those two areas were among the 16 STPs where access rates decreased, with Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland posting a 4 percentage point decline. This brought performance down from well above expectation in 2019 (6.3%) to significantly below (2.3%) in 2020. The next largest year-on-year declines were seen in Cornwall (3.7 percentage points) and Devon (2.6 percentage points), two of the three best performing STP areas in 2019 (along with Staffordshire).

Chart 2 illustrates the complete set of year-on-year changes in access rates across the 42 STP/ICS footprints. Chart 3 shows the full set of percentages for the 42 STP/ICS footprints across the 2020 calendar year, compared to the target percentage for 2020/21.

Chart 2 – Change in access rates for perinatal mental health services across all STP areas, comparing 2020 and 2019 calendar years

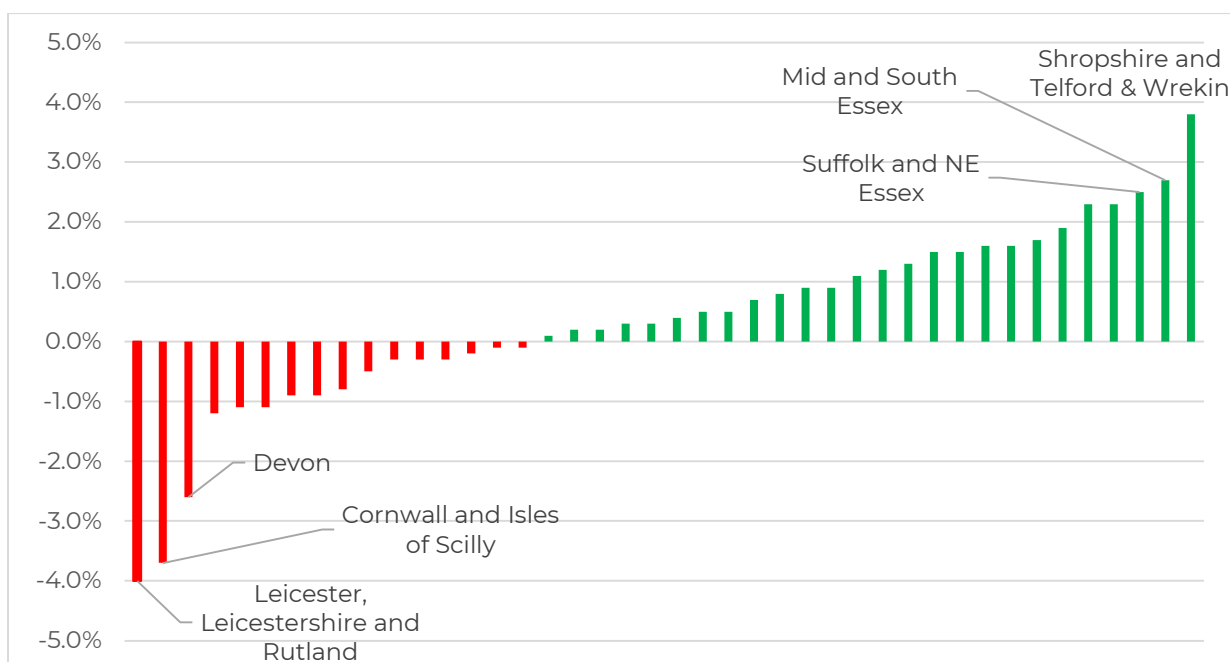
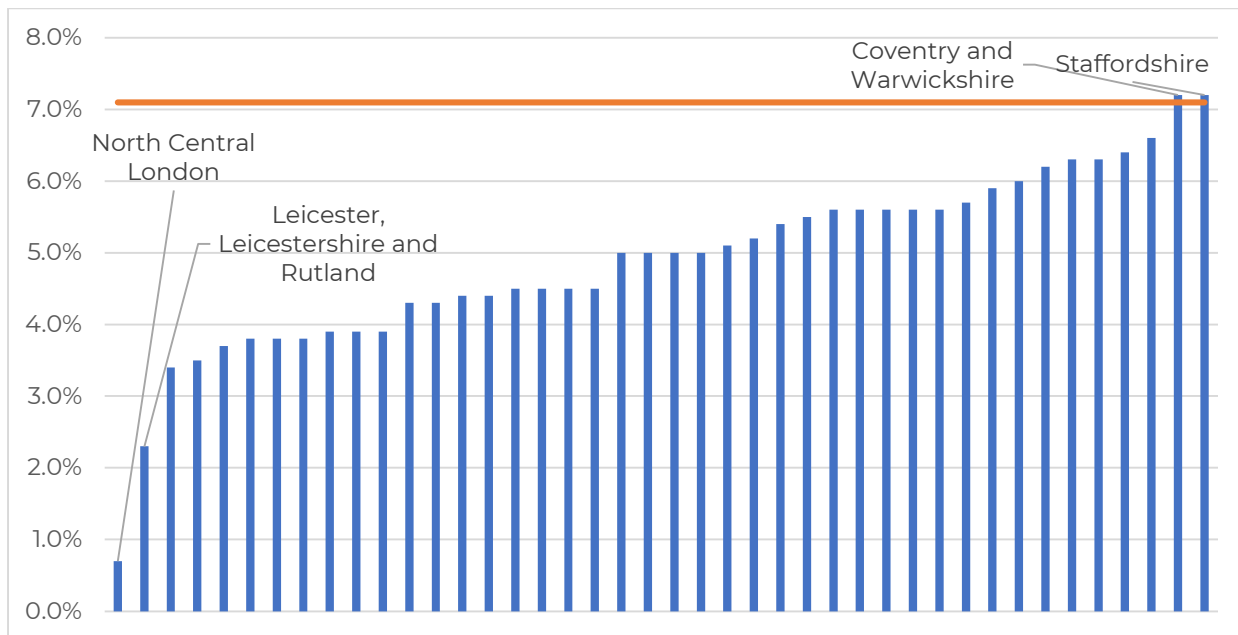


Chart 3 – Perinatal access performance across all STP/ICS areas across 2020 calendar year



What next?

RCPsych will continue to analyse and monitor the access data in future updates of Mental Health Watch to determine whether access rates progress towards the national expectations for 2020/21 and beyond. There has been much to celebrate from the successful expansion of community perinatal mental health services and it is crucial that progress is resumed as the worst impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic hopefully recede in the coming months.

Sources

All of the access data has been extracted from the most recent NHS Mental Health Dashboard published by NHS England on 13 May 2021.