



Dorset Maternity and Neonatal Voices



**15 Steps for Maternity and Neonatal care in Dorset
at Dorset County Hospital - Report**
September 2025

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You can learn more about the 15 Steps for Maternity via the toolkit [here](#)

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Introduction

What is 15 Steps?

The 15 Steps template is an NHS England toolkit that looks at improving the quality of services, usually in hospital settings, by bringing in ‘fresh eyes’ to visit, observe and spot things that staff might walk past.

You can learn more about the 15 Steps for Maternity via the toolkit [here](#)

It was co-designed with a diverse group of representatives and service users, who advised on what should be assessed during 15 Steps visits.

The toolkit enables 15 Steps visitors to observe and reflect on whether the settings and the staff are friendly, welcoming, accessible, informative and organised; and whether the services feel safe, personal, kind and calm. Recommendations for change and improvement can then be made.

We aim to undertake a 15 Steps for maternity and neonatal visit in Dorset every 6 months, with progress reviewed at regular Safety Walkabouts and Walk the Patch visits.

“I can tell what kind of care my daughter is going to get within 15 steps of walking onto the ward.”



What we did

In September 2025, we visited Dorset County Hospital in Dorchester with a group of current and recent service users, organisation representatives and NHS staff. We used the 15 Steps toolkit to explore the spaces and record first impressions, to consider the general atmosphere, and to reflect on interactions with staff.

Where did we go?

We split into three small groups and explored three areas, including

1. Maternity
2. SCBU/Neonatal
3. Entrance/Car Park



Who took part?

We issued an open invitation to service users to take part in the visits. We advertised in our Participation Volunteer WhatsApp group, on social media and via our mailing list. We also invited members from local community groups and organisations that work closely with maternity or neonatal service users.

12 volunteers joined us and 5 members of the midwifery team, including past service users, currently pregnant service users planning their birth at DCH and independent doulas.

We were also joined by representatives from:

Dorset LMNS

DorPip

Dorset Mind

Kushti Bok

Dorset Race Equality Council



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What did we do?

At each setting we made notes and took pictures then discussed the areas we had visited as a group. We considered how things looked, felt and sounded to each member of the group, hearing about each person's unique experiences. We talked about how we would 'rate' each area, and we discussed our recommendations for change and improvement.

At the end of each visit, we gave feedback to the hospital leadership teams about our findings and initial recommendations.

We reviewed all the feedback we gathered on the visit to create this report which presents our findings and recommendations.

We used these five themes as a basis for reviewing the space and informing recommendations:

1. Welcoming and informative
2. Safe and clean
3. Friendly and personal
4. Organised and calm
5. Accessible and Inclusive.

About us

Dorset MNVP is the formal partner of Dorset NHS Integrated Care Board (ICB), responsible for providing the voice of service users to inform development of maternity and neonatal care in the county.

We support the Local Maternity and Neonatal System (LMNS) to ensure services are delivered in a kind, personal and safe way by making sure the service user voice is central to all decision-making and quality oversight. This enables the ICB to fulfil its responsibilities in line with the three-year delivery plan for maternity and neonatal services in England.

We engage with people who have recently used local maternity and neonatal services, listening to their experiences and feedback. We share their insight with the Dorset Integrated Care System and the maternity and neonatal service providers it commissions, to make sure people's opinions are at the heart of shaping local services.

General

Issues to be considered across the site

- Plain, white clinical environment - add warmth, colour, and imagery throughout
- Physical leaflets - information only accessible via mobile/QR codes mostly
- Better accessibility needed for learning difficulties, limited literacy, hearing/sight impairments (photos, big print, easy read, multiple languages)
- Limited soft/warm lighting - only in cove rooms, harsh white/fluorescent lighting elsewhere
- Need handwashing posters and promotion throughout (currently only antibac at entrance)
- Emergency directional signage missing from drop off point
- Review all damaged/outdated posters and boards (several ripped, tattered, grubby, or contain errors)
- No information about trust values visible to parents
- Psychological support, mental health, stress/coping strategies information not visible
- Information boards focus on clinical topics - add bonding, parent wellbeing content
- Red emergency ropes in toilets should be at floor level for falls
- Walk-in showers needed in all rooms (baths difficult post-labour/c-section)
- Staff schedules unclear - show specific hours and shift coverage so parents know their lead contact
- Consider replicating warmth from bereavement room and SCBU in other clinical areas
- Review inclusive language use (e.g. 'Mums & Dads')
- Curtains only privacy measure - consider additional confidentiality safeguards



Welcoming & Informative

General/Multiple Areas

Positive

- Lovely stencils on neonatal - similar needed for maternity
- Maternity safety suggestion box - great idea
- Nice quiet, peaceful
- Labour wards bright and airy, lots of windows
- Lots of information
- Clean and organised
- Informative boards
- Reception felt peaceful and safe

Areas for improvement

- Plain, white, clinical feel throughout - needs more warmth, colour (like yellow walls in corridor), soft lighting, and imagery to make spaces more welcoming
- Dark areas with broken lights need addressing
- Poor signage from drop-off point, especially for emergencies; entrance signs tired/need replacing; contradictory visiting times information displayed
- Limited parent-focused information throughout - needs more visual displays, multilingual content, and offline options (not just QR codes)
- Lack of postnatal care information
- Better communication needed for learning difficulties and limited literacy (big print, read easy formats)
- No trust values information visible to parents
- Multiple posters damaged/tattered/grubby and need updating (entrance poster, triage poster, BSOTS poster, day room whiteboard, Ockenden report poster)
- Review language: 'Mums & Dads' may be outdated; breastfeeding signage should be mindful of not making people feel like failures
- TV in reception should consider multiple languages
- Need handwashing promotion posters
- Maternity waiting room has too much information which may overwhelm - consider using drug/substance abuse board space for bonding and wellbeing information instead
- Staff boards only on Neonatal unit - consider parent-relevant information boards elsewhere
- How would parents know who the first / lead point of contact is?



Maternity waiting area

Areas for improvement

- Seats don't look at all comfortable (maternity waiting area)
- Maternity waiting - very cold, clinical, not clear that this is the waiting area for maternity, no pictures of babies - overall, consider full sensory experience of parents/new parents coming in and consider their feelings. They will be overwhelmed and want/need a calming space
- Waiting area maternity (inside door) Not very welcoming, I liked the infant feeding support poster/flag but the area seems to have no or little information for the new parents
- Waiting area maternity (inside door) Drugs substance abuse info - takes up a lot of space. Could the board be used better? Info re.bonding, parents own generic wellbeing. (Dorpip representative who took part in 15 steps is happy to help with this (Ines))

Bereavement room

Positive

- Bereavement room - Cosy, warm. I liked the warmth of this room and wondering if some of this warmth could be replicated in other areas. All parents would appreciate being in a warm, cosy environment while here. Some areas have to be clinical but can be softened by creating spaces that are bright but a bit more comfortable
- Room 33, lovely space, carefully considered

SCBU/Neonatal

Positive

- Lots of information cards
- Neonatal journey cards in entrance but hidden
- Lovely photos and stories on wall for world prematurity day
- Welcoming and bright
- Patient stories - so helpful for families
- Laminated story books are so lovely

Areas for improvement

- Journey cards need more attention, took straight past them
- Maybe display some information on mental health in the kitchen area?
- Stress and coping strategies displayed for staff and parents would be good
- Easy read booklets needed - grab box for neurodivergent service users etc.
- Opportunity for information in the expressing / feeding room

Access from Carpark

Positive

- Multistorey - a relief to know you will get a space
- Payment easy to use
- Told about TV screen for outside maternity to come, good idea

Areas for improvement

- 'No idea where to go'
- Not clear where partners could park in an emergency
- Lots of scaffolding, workmen, vehicles
- Signs for maternity not clear - tiny east wing entrance sign
- Signage lacking when reaching the pencils. Struggle to see where Maternity is
- Need clearer signage dotted around to show where to go easily



Safe & Clean

General

Positive

- Feel safe in the space
- Visible safety board
- Felt staff could be identified in an emergency
- Door to co-ordinators room open, welcoming
- Clean everywhere
- The unit is calm, clean and inviting. Staff very friendly, the facilities for families are so good
- Whole unit on one level is easy to access all departments

Areas for improvement

- Don't feel handwashing is promoted, not even in special care, only antibac on entrance
- Some of the 'clinical' rooms need holes filling etc. I would be more unsettled by poor upkeep than the sight of a resuscitaire or equip to save lives
- Red emergency rope in toilets - shouldn't it be on the floor in case of falls?
- Smelt like a swimming pool, strong bleach scent
- Lift to first floor grubby, mirrors smeared and floor dirty

Antenatal & Labour rooms

Positive

- Antenatal room, clean and not too crowded
- Antenatal rooms light and airy
- Antenatal wards are light, airy and promote socialisation if desired. Really clean and smelled sterile but not oppressive
- Labour room - clean, well organised, I like the chart on the bathroom door
- Labour wards bright and airy, lots of windows
- Bright light rooms

Areas for improvement

- Labour rooms a little clinical

Postnatal / Transitional Care

Positive

- Ward feels safe and secure
- Clear who the staff are and their roles
- Facilities are clean, working and accessible
- Evidence-based information on safe-baby care is accessible
- It is clearly communicated that confidentiality is respected
- Hand washing is promoted

Issues to address

- Bathrooms should have handrails next to toilet / in shower
- Although we didn't experience it during this visit, service users present did mention that bathrooms had blood on the toilet and bathroom floor despite being cleaned regularly
- Printed copies of DadPad dusty, not being used

Friendly & Personal

General & Antenatal & Labour rooms

Positive

- Staff toilet, sign about self-care/breathing
- The unit is calm, clean and inviting. Staff very friendly, the facilities for families are so good
- Day room - lots of resources and encourages socialisation. Nice space for staff and parents to mix. Welcome space for siblings. Much better resourced than it was in April 2025!
- Lots of food available in the day room
- Lots of info on options for birth including outside of guidance
- Bereavement room - Cosy, warm. I liked the warmth of this room and wondering if some of this warmth could be replicated in other areas. All parents would appreciate being in a warm, cosy environment while here.
- Room 33, lovely space, carefully considered

Areas for improvement

- Postnatal - Caesarean to SCBU - Rooms in SCBU not suitable for C-sec mums, how could this be handled better?
- Need walk in showers in all rooms as baths are hard to use after labour especially c-section
- Leaflets for gypsies and travellers needed
- Someone had pushed the call button, but no one responding
- Can't see choice of place and type of birth promoted
- Can't see evidence of meeting the needs for hearing/sight impaired service users' needs being considered
- Is curtains the only measure for safeguarding confidentiality?
- More psychological support for families would be good to see
- I liked the colostrum poster/notice board and information, perhaps it could be replicated in the rooms
- Could only see coping strategies of pain relief/positions on bathroom door/antenatal rooms
- More patient information would be good in the day room



Neonatal

Positive

- Lots of privacy
- Parents rooms, very large 'feels like home'
- Feeding all families on the unit is incredible
- Staff board with pictures
- Whiteboards, great addition. Maybe a staff intro to patient on how they can use it - communicating with staff, babies likes/dislikes
- All staff have black on yellow badges for visual impairment
- Great to hear work is happening on guideline for inclusive communication
- Laminated kids' books - wonderful
- Fi-care, massive culture change, very successful with positive feedback
- Heard positive feedback about Nicky in SCBU 'amazing with infant feeding, only breastfeeding because of her support'
- SCBU such a relaxing space
- Care on SCBU feels very personalised 'felt like home from home', good to hear there is close working with maternity
- Family room well set up with comfy chairs and things for families
- Good promotion of expressing

Areas for improvement

- Hand cream for parents who will be washing hands regularly
- Feedback from parents sharing patient experiences in foyer, could be used in reporting CQC assessments
- Want incubators that turn into open cots
- Need more sterilisers - now have to be rinsed after taking out of cold sterilisers with sterile water - steriliser bags needed - refused due to cost
- Link nurses in each unit who contact families ahead of repatriation
- Meals for SCBU get delivered to maternity and SCBU staff are not always aware
- Lack of microwave sterilisers for SCBU
- Sensory training to support families to help with processing



Organised & Calm

General maternity

Positive

- Nice parent kitchen
- Nice big kitchen space and table, coffee machine, great
- Where equipment is in corridors it's on one side so accessible
- Refreshment facilities great in each department
- Clean and organised
- The unit is calm, clean and inviting. Staff very friendly, the facilities for families are so good
- Nice quiet, peaceful
- Corridor outside the day room - love the yellow walls! Nice softer colours would be lovely everywhere
- Pool room - lovely! I love the pictures on the wall
- The cove: very homely, apparatus to promote active labour
- Maternity bay room is nice and spacious
- Postnatal room, nice private space

Areas for improvement

- More pictures / artwork would make it less clinical
- Totally different feeling to SCBU - long corridors

Neonatal

Positive

- Calm, warm and quiet
- Reclining chairs
- Great kitchen for parents next to parent rooms

Areas for improvement

- Need a warm lighting option in SCBU - white light is over stimulating, would help both families and staff
- Linen room great for parents & washing facilities if needed
- Bell outside unit not working
- Buzzer to SCBU needs fixing
- Staff overwhelmed (what SOs saying to each other)



Action Plan

From the feedback we received on the day, we have developed an action plan. Maternity staff are tasked with making changes based on feedback, and we have asked them to report back on progress towards these goals

Area	Issue	Action Needed	Name	Date
Maternity entrance	Signage to maternity from carpark unclear			
Maternity	Information on staff needed for service users (like SCBU board with photos)			
Maternity reception	Some broken lighting in maternity reception			
All	More soft lighting options needed in labour rooms on maternity and SCBU not just Cove			
All	Need more parent info throughout, no leaflets only options to scan with phone			
All	Info needed for GRT communities			
Corridor	Needs painting			
Entrance Maternity	Posters need replacing-damaged			
Entrance Maternity	Visiting times by Maternity entrance contradictory			
Maternity waiting area	Not very welcoming / clear it is the entrance for maternity and seating is uncomfortable			

Area	Issue	Action Needed	Name	Date
Maternity waiting area (inside)	Broken ceiling light			
Maternity waiting area (inside)	Drugs substance abuse info - takes up a lot of space. Could the board be used better?			
Labour ward	Could labour rooms have some softening similar to cove spaces			
SCBU/ Neonatal	Some information on mental health in the kitchen area?			
All	Easy read booklets needed - grab box for neurodivergent service users etc			
All	More promotion of handwashing			
All	Pull cord in toilet doesn't reach the floor			
Lift	Lift from entrance to first floor maternity grubby, mirrors and floor dirty			
Maternity	Observed a long wait time when someone pressed the call bell at reception			

Area	Issue	Action Needed	Name	Date
SCBU / Neonatal	More psychological support for families would be good to see			
Labour ward	More coping strategies/ pain relief and positions of birth info needed in rooms			
Day room	More patient information needed			
SCBU/ Neonatal	Rooms in SCBU not suitable for service users who've had caesarean births			
Labour	Need walk in showers in all rooms as baths are hard to use after labour especially c-section			
SCBU	Handcream for parent washing hands frequently			
SCBU	Want incubators that turn into cots			
SCBU	Need more microwave sterilisers and bags			
SCBU	Meals for families get delivered to maternity and sometimes not received			

Area	Issue	Action Needed	Name	Date
SCBU? Neonatal	Bell outside not working			

Other Questions/Considerations

- Will there be designated waiting areas for electives/partners?
- How often in the DAU seating used? In both my pregnancies, both high risk - I only ever sat in the corridor
- Entry - visiting times sign outside entrance is confusingly worded and unclear? Sign says call if no intercom answer but no number displayed



For more information or to get involved with Dorset MNVP, visit our website or follow our Facebook page using the QR code below



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