



Exclusive: NHSE home birth proposals spark major safety fears

By Emily Townsend | 28 April 2026

NHSE letter to coroner suggests “withdrawal” of services over “out of guidance” births

Royal College of Midwives warns move risks “pushing women towards giving birth entirely alone”

Comes amid multiple service suspensions since NHSE directive to trusts in November

NHS England is considering allowing midwives to “withdraw” services from women deemed to be giving birth at home against professional advice, *HSJ* has learned.

The Royal College of Midwives has warned that if this advice is introduced, it risks “push[ing] women towards giving birth entirely alone, [presenting] far greater risk to mother and baby”.

The disagreement comes as NHS services urgently seek clarity from system leaders on how they should best support home births and some high-risk pregnancies.

However, the advice would also cover how services should respond to other care and treatment requests that are considered “highly unsafe or unreasonable”.

NHS England’s discussions about **Ask HSJ** revealed in a letter responding to a coroner’s *Prevention of Future Deaths* report.

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The letter is dated 24 December, but it was only published last month, and *HSJ* understands a definitive decision about the advice has not yet been made.



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The letter said: “We will build on work already started, looking to clarify whether NHS health professionals providing maternity services may withdraw midwifery services from women birthing at home against professional advice and/or from women making requests with regards to care/treatment that are considered highly unsafe or unreasonable.”

It added: “In developing [better home birth resources], NHSE and its partners will consider the ethical responsibility and proportionality of offering women an NHS home birth, while taking into account that women have a legal right to choose what healthcare they receive.

“In addition, some women who cannot be supported to birth at home due to the level of risk may choose to give birth unassisted, which carries a higher risk.”

However, an NHSE spokesman told *HSJ* that maternity teams “will always offer care, advice and support” to women through pregnancy and birth, adding: “This includes discussing the risks associated with where they choose to give birth.

“We have recently asked hospitals to urgently review their home birth services, including ensuring appropriate training, risk assessments, and transfer plans, and we continue to work with partners to develop clearer national resources on home births.”

HSJ revealed in January that several providers have already been warning of an increase in women forced to “freebirth” without assistance, often due to repeated service suspensions and staff shortages.

However, the NHSE letter appears  themselves would formally withdraw midwifery services from women birthing at home “against professional advice”, and from

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women making requests about their care which were considered “highly unsafe or unreasonable”.

The letter was published in April as part of NHSE’s response to Manchester coroner Joanne Kearsley, who issued a *PFD* report with a plethora of national concerns about home births following the deaths of Jennifer and Agnes Cahill.

The report prompted chief midwifery officer Kate Brintworth to order all trusts to “urgently” review the safety of home birth services in November.

‘Erosion of human rights by stealth’

RCM’s midwifery director, Fiona Gibb, said NHSE’s statement poses a serious risk to mother and baby. She said: “Withdrawing midwifery care from women who choose to birth at home – even against clinical advice – does not make those women safer.

“It risks pushing them towards giving birth entirely alone, with no professional support, which carries far greater risk to both mother and baby. The answer is properly staffed, properly resourced services, not policies that could leave women without anyone at all.”

Meanwhile, charity Birthrights described such a move as an “erosion of human rights by stealth”, stressing that it appears NHSE is considering whether midwifery services can be withdrawn in all settings, not only those choosing to give birth at home.

CEO Hazel Williams said: “We will not allow an erosion of human rights by stealth to occur unnoticed.

“We will continue to advocate for personalised, human rights-centred care to be embedded as standard practice for all, regardless of ‘risk’ or ‘out of guidance’ label, and specifically, that women and birthing people who request midwifery support in labour should never be denied this support.”

It comes as at least a dozen trusts have suspended their home birth services following the NHSE directive in November due to gaps in staffing, safety, and training, and as coroners have raised concerns about trusts’ handling of “out of guidance” births as recently as last week.

The Department of Health and Social Care’s response to the Cahill PFD, also published last month, indicates that ministers will be engaging with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to amend intrapartum guidance to reflect the risk of maternal death associated with home births.

The HSJ Reducing Health Inequalities Forum 2026 provides a space for systems to share what works, spotlight innovation at scale, and align local delivery with national leadership priorities.

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Source

PFD reports, letters, information provided to HSJ

Source Date

November-April 2026

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