

Investment in maternity and neonatal services in Wales

Sands and Tommy's Joint Policy Unit briefing

Key messages

- After a period of overall decline in the stillbirth rate in Wales since 2010, there has been little change since 2018. In 2023, the stillbirth rate was 4.0 per 1,000 births. This is higher than any of the other UK nations.
- There has been little progress to reduce neonatal mortality in Wales. Although the rate has declined since 2010 overall, the rate in 2022 was higher than the rate in 2013, showing a lack of sustained progress.
- More investment is needed to reduce rates of stillbirth and neonatal death, tackle inequalities and support improvements in the safety and quality of services.
- Since 2020/21, investment in maternity and neonatal services has not kept up with the rate of inflation, and spending in this area has remained a relatively small proportion of overall spending on healthcare in Wales.

Rates of pregnancy and baby loss in Wales

On average 13 babies a day are stillborn or die during the first 28 days of life across the UK.

Overall, stillbirth and neonatal mortality rates have declined in Wales since 2010, although progress has been uneven. The stillbirth rate has declined since 2010, and reached a low of 4.0 per 1,000 births¹ in 2023, however this continues to be higher than any of the other UK nations.

Progress to reduce the neonatal mortality rate has been slower: a 3.6% reduction between 2010 and 2022. The rate in 2022 was higher than the rate in 2013, showing a lack of sustained progress in reducing neonatal deaths. In 2022, the neonatal mortality rate was 2.7 per 1,000 live births for all gestations².

Issues with maternity care in Wales

Multiple reports have highlighted the need to improve the quality and safety of maternity and neonatal services. While each UK nation faces similar systemic issues, much of the data are reported separately. To analyse the data and support devolved policy makers, the Sands and Tommy's Joint Policy Unit published tailored briefings on maternity and neonatal services with the data for each of the four UK nations. You can read more in the Wales briefing [here](#).

The last national review of maternity services in Wales took place between June 2019 and January 2020 (prior to the Covid-19 pandemic) and found that the quality of care is good and that maternity services in general are delivered in a safe and effective way³. However, individual inspections since 2020 have identified patient safety concerns including at the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff

where the maternity department needs urgent improvement⁴. In December 2023, two health boards in Wales were subject to enhanced monitoring of their maternity and neonatal services⁵.

Too often, avoidable deaths occur because of care that is not in line with nationally agreed standards, including recommendations in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidance, the All Wales Maternity and Neonatal Guidelines or others. Nearly all (97%) of the Perinatal Mortality Review Tool (PMRT) reviews completed in Wales during 2023 found at least one issue with the care that was provided⁶.

Investment in maternity and neonatal services is needed to improve care and outcomes for families in Wales

Following a Freedom of Information request, Wales Health Boards provided the below data on spending on maternity and neonatal services. This suggests that in 2022/23, a total of nearly £210 million was spent on these services.

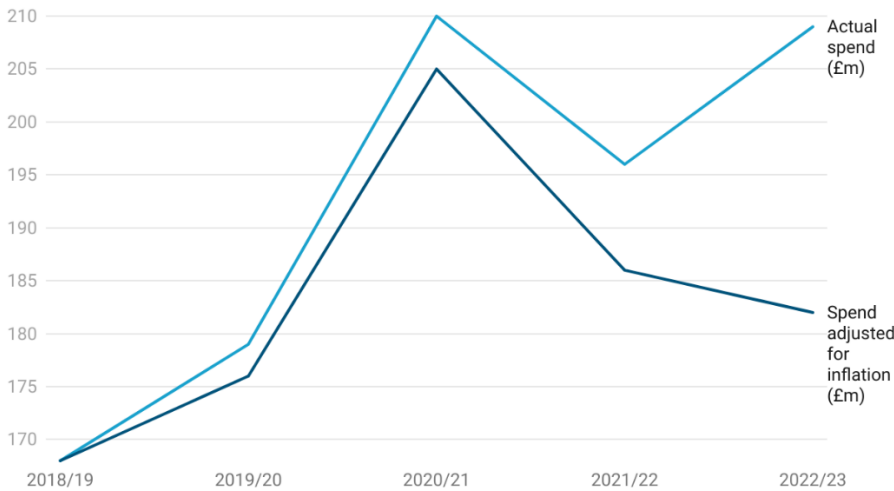
Table 1: Spending on maternity and neonatal services in Wales by Health Board

Health board	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Anuerin Bevan University	24,538,991	25,292,068	26,078,501	26,043,157	28,367,197
Betsi Cadwaladr University	33,146,597	35,007,572	39,153,977	38,631,688	39,620,381
Hywel Dda University	11,911,627	12,483,565	13,383,872	13,749,755	14,612,546
Powys Teaching Health Board	2,026,000	1,946,000	2,090,000	2,057,000	2,218,000
Cwm Taf Morgannwg University	17,668,993	29,058,424	28,929,800	31,108,377	32,688,480
Cardiff and Vale University	35,362,615	41,419,991	47,873,909	47,049,299	51,950,238
Swansea Bay University	43,407,440	33,561,924	52,689,995	37,8224,552	40,013,748
TOTAL	168,062,263	178,769,544	210,200,054	196,463,828	209,470,590

Source: Wales Health Boards, via Freedom of Information request.

Our analysis suggests that these commitments are not sufficient to keep track with inflation, and below the scale required to achieve the transformative improvements that are required in maternity and neonatal services.

Spend on maternity and neonatal services in Wales adjusted for inflation

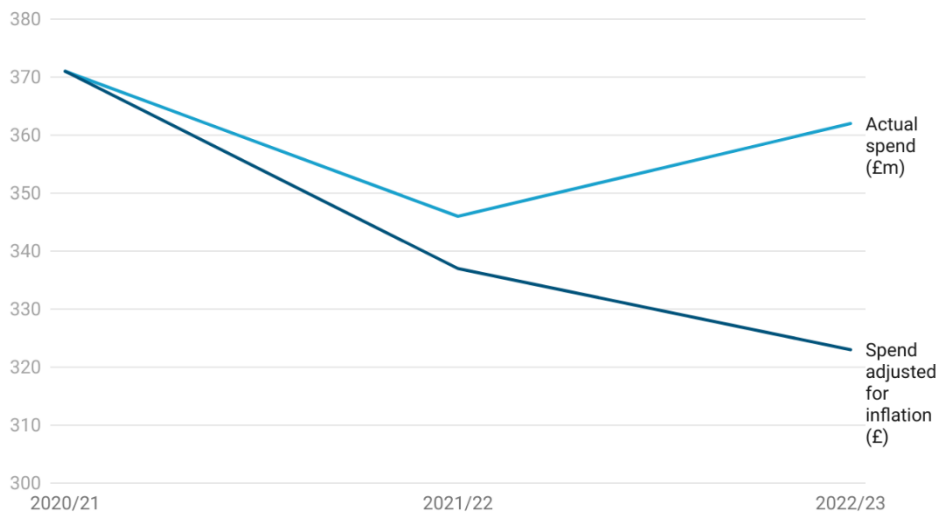


Data obtained from Wales Health Boards through Freedom of Information (FOI) request. CPI Inflation calculated using Bank of England Inflation Calculator using 2018 prices, correct as of December 2024.
 Chart: Sands & Tommy's Joint Policy Unit • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Total amount spent on maternity and neonatal services as reported by Wales Health Boards, adjusted for inflation.

The Welsh government also publishes annual NHS expenditure by budget category and year, available [here](#). The data set combines maternity and reproductive health into one expenditure line, and reports on neonates separately. The data shows that in 2022/23, a total of £362 million was spent on maternity, neonates and reproductive health services across Health Boards and Public Health Wales

Spend on maternity, reproductive health and neonates adjusted for inflation



CPI Inflation calculated using Bank of England Inflation Calculator using 2020 prices, correct as of December 2024.
 Chart: Sands & Tommy's Joint Policy Unit • Source: Stats Wales • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2. Amount spent on maternity, neonates and reproductive health published by the Welsh government.

The data shows that spending for maternity, neonates and reproductive health has decreased overall since 2020/21, and decreased significantly in 2021/22. We can see that when adjusting for inflation, spending has also decreased in real terms.

Spending on maternity, neonates and reproductive health is a relatively small proportion of overall spend on healthcare. Figure 3 shows that spending on maternity, neonates and reproductive health as a percentage of overall spend has declined slightly since 2020/21.

The amount spent on maternity, reproductive health and neonates as a % of overall spend on healthcare in Wales has declined

There has been a decline in spending on maternity, reproductive health and neonates from 4.6% of overall spend on healthcare in 2020/21 to 4.01% in 2022/23.

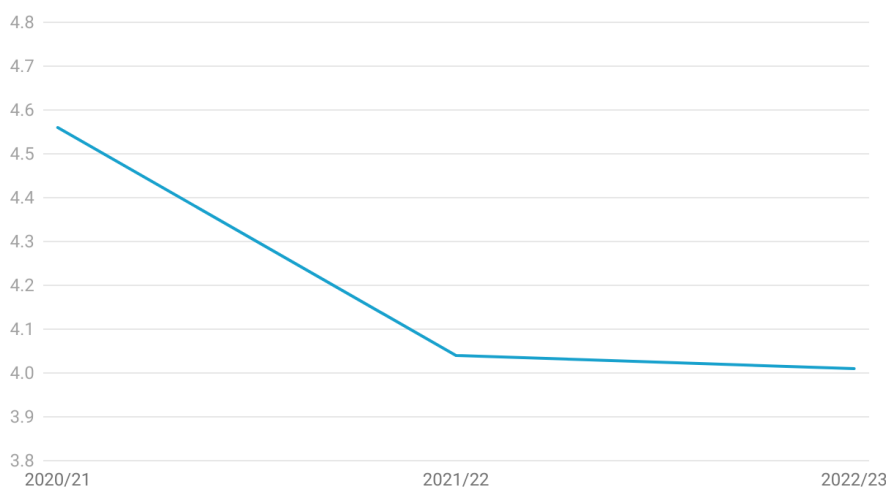


Chart: Sands & Tommy's Joint Policy Unit • Source: Stats Wales • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3

References

- 1 Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 28 October 2024, ONS website, statistical bulletin, [Births in England and Wales: 2023](#)
- 2 Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 31 May 2024, ONS website, statistical bulletin, [Child and infant mortality in England and Wales: 2022](#)
- 3 Health Inspectorate Wales. National Review: Maternity Services Phase One [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2023 Dec 8]. Available from: https://www.hiw.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/20201118HIWNationalReviewofMaternityServicesEN_0.pdf
- 4 Health Inspectorate Wales. Inspection Summary Report. Maternity Unit, University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Dec 8]. Available from: <https://www.hiw.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/20230621UHWMaternity-Summary-EN.pdf>
- 5 Welsh Government. NHS Wales escalation and intervention arrangement [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Dec 12]. Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/nhs-wales-escalation-and-intervention-arrangements>
- 6 Kurinczuk JJ, Smith P, Bevan C, Brigante L, Burden C, Draper ES, et al. Learning from Standardised Reviews When Babies Die. National Perinatal Review Tool: Fifth Annual Report Tables of Findings. 2023.