

**UNICEF UK BABY FRIENDLY INITIATIVE CASE STUDY****THE ROYAL DEVON AND EXETER NHS FOUNDATION TRUST NEONATAL UNIT**

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## MAINTAINING CARE DURING COVID-19: CASE STUDY



The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust Neonatal Unit earned the prestigious Baby Friendly Gold Award in June 2020, demonstrating their commitment to embedding Baby Friendly care in the long term. In a case study with Donna Rowe, the Trust's Clinical Nurse Manager, we share the unit's success in maintaining high standards of care during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Keeping parents and babies together: A philosophy rooted in unit culture

Keeping parents and babies together is a philosophy strongly rooted in The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust Neonatal Unit's culture. When faced with the challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, including the mandatory two-week isolation period for Covid-positive patients, the unit quickly adopted new policies, procedures and innovations to ensure staff and patient safety and to minimise separation of babies, their mothers and families.



*"It simply wasn't an option to separate parents and babies during this crucial time. Our team would immediately question any suggestion of this, as it is far from normal practice on our unit. We would do anything possible to minimise periods of separation."*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

## Optimising unit space: Developing the 'hot area'

While many services struggled to accommodate social distancing and quarantine measures due to a lack of available space, the layout of The Royal Devon and Exeter's neonatal unit proved invaluable. By re-working a pre-existing suite of parent bedrooms separate to the main ward, the unit developed a 'hot area' – a comfortable space with adequate ventilation where Covid-positive parents and babies were supported to isolate together for the full two weeks of their quarantine.



*"We've been extremely lucky that the setup of our unit accommodates the creation of the hot area. Rearranging fold-down beds, sofas and furniture enabled us to create a safe, welcoming space for parents. It hasn't always been easy, but you've got to work with what you've got. It makes all the difference in the world for a parent to be able to sleep beside their newborn."*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

To date the unit has used the hot area for around six cases of Covid-positive patients, each time providing excellent care in the form of breastfeeding support and a 1:1 monitoring nurse. The unit also prioritises providing families with adequate living arrangements:



*"During what can be a very emotionally difficult time in their lives, parents on the neonatal unit don't demand extravagance. They want to be with their baby in a safe, clean, comfortable area. By having the practical things like fold-down beds, breastfeeding pumps and comfortable chairs, you are giving them what they need. Hopefully we helped make this special time with their new baby as positive an experience as possible."*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

## Overcoming challenges and maintaining safety

As with services across the country, The Royal Devon and Exeter Neonatal Unit experienced first-hand the complexities brought on by the pandemic.

### Staffing difficulties

Staffing shortages and redeployment made staff planning and the presence of an on-hand nurse in the hot area difficult at times. In response to low staff morale, the unit encouraged protected breaks, peer-to-peer support and had clear procedures for issues requiring escalation.



*"We've gone through phases of low staff morale and isolation. But when you watch families bond with their babies, the sacrifices are worth it. The adaptation has been phenomenal – the collective attitude is to persevere because it's best for mothers and babies. We're very proud of our staff and feel a sense of achievement of what we have gone through together."*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

## Improving communication

The pandemic also necessitated immediate changes in the way the unit communicated. Walkie talkies were first used between staff and monitoring nurses in the hot area until October 2020 when the Trust implemented My Care, an electronic patient record platform.

Initially there was reluctance amongst staff to embrace this digital transformation, however it soon radically changed care provision on the unit. The technology enables quick and efficient collaboration between nurses and doctors and supports instant communication with those in the hot area, allowing for faster delivery of test results.



*“The entire process of delivering care instantly became easier. Our team can communicate quicker and bounce ideas off one another, allowing us to explore different paths of care faster.”*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

## Infection prevention and control

To reduce risk of infection spread, The Royal Devon and Exeter Neonatal Unit examined existing hygiene procedures and liaised closely with their infection control team to develop new, comprehensive policies to protect patients and staff.



*“We had to create brand new processes for what we previously thought of as simple procedures. Even accommodating meal delivery to the hot area became more laborious, requiring staff members to double-bag and dispose of the waste in a more structured, routine way.”*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

This resulted in new obstacles to overcome, for example midwives spending significant amounts of time putting on PPE before each postnatal check.



*“Our unit was certainly not immune to the difficulties and new challenges imposed by Covid-19 policies. But we embraced these and did everything we could in the interest of the babies and parents under our care.”*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

## Long-term learnings: Innovations to keep

Reflecting on their learnings from the pandemic, The Royal Devon and Exeter Neonatal Unit are keen to implement long-term changes to their operations to continue improving their service.



*“We’re looking to improve the hot area so it can be used in the short- and long-term. We’re aiming to install a phone line and air conditioning. Although there is proper ventilation, it can get hot in the summer for staff in PPE. It’s the little things we’ve learnt – we’re always looking to improve.”*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

The unit also plans to use the hot area as a method of delivering transitional care in the future, for example by accommodating parents with babies who are on low-flow oxygen and require nursing, but who may not necessarily need to be in a parent room on the main ward.



*"We are fortunate to be planning ahead and making these changes. The families have been very appreciative of what we have done here. Many have spoken with other parents who experienced care on other units who may not have had the same opportunities as ours. What we have realised from NIFN meetings is that you don't know what other units are going through – but we are all going through it together."*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

### **Moving forward: Embracing the 'new normal'**

The unit is looking ahead with optimism as they embrace the 'new normal'. They credit their success to hard work and the effort of their staff and are pleased that the innovations adopted have allowed them to involve parents even more in the care of their newborns.



*"It was a new experience for staff to have parents in isolation for a full two-week period. This has been a real turning point and enabled us to involve parents that much more in the care of their baby. Looking back, it is phenomenal what we have achieved. We feel very proud. Covid has been tough on everyone. It's nice if we can help in any way we can to make the whole family's neonatal journey a positive one."*

- Donna Rowe, The Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

Feedback from parents who have used the service is very positive, with one parent saying:



*"The team have been brilliant about setting up a whole area so I could stay with my baby, despite being Covid positive, and despite all the disruption this causes the team caring for us. We have been really well cared for."*

- Parent utilising hot area, December 2021

## Appendix: About the Baby Friendly Gold Award

The Baby Friendly Achieving Sustainability standards (the Gold Award) are designed to help services to embed Baby Friendly care in their workplace for the long term. The new standards aim to embed sustainable leadership, a positive culture, ongoing monitoring and continued progression across services. These standards provide a solid foundation on which services can sustain and progress the Baby Friendly standards into the future, helping them continue to promote, protect and support breastfeeding and to support all mothers to build a close and loving relationship with their baby.

Services that are already accredited as Baby Friendly can be assessed against the new Achieving Sustainability standards, becoming re-accredited as 'Baby Friendly with Sustainability' and receiving a Gold Award if successful. Working towards the Gold Award acts as an incentive for services to properly embed the Achieving Sustainability standards and so consolidate and protect all the hard work that has gone into achieving Baby Friendly accreditation. The Award is a recognition that the service is not only implementing the Baby Friendly Initiative standards, but that they also have the leadership, culture and systems to maintain this over the long term

Working towards the Gold Award acts as an incentive for services to properly embed the Achieving Sustainability standards and so consolidate and protect all the hard work that has gone into achieving Baby Friendly accreditation. This will mean that future generations of babies, their mothers and families will still continue to experience Baby Friendly standards of care. The Award will be a recognition that the service is not only implementing the Baby Friendly Initiative standards, but that they also have the leadership, culture and systems to maintain this over the long term. Learn more about the Gold Award [on our website](#).