

Rt Hon Harriet Harman KC MP
Member of Parliament for Camberwell & Peckham
Mother of the House of Commons



House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA

Cllr Evelyn Akoto
Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing
Southwark Council
160 Tooley Street
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Dear Evelyn,

I am writing to express my full support for your initiative in establishing the Southwark Maternity Commission following your webinar to launch the Commission along with your co-chair Professor Dame Kinnair. I look forward to reading the commission's final report, recommendations and action plan to support change in Southwark to improve maternity outcomes and reduce the drivers of inequality.

One of the most pressing concerns is that Black women are most at risk during childbirth and the most recent data shows that black women are 3.7 times more likely than white women to die¹. This is totally unacceptable and must be tackled urgently.

This is of particular concern in Southwark, where there is a high proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic residents. In Southwark 25% of residents are from from a Black, Black British, Caribbean or African ethnic background compared to 4% across England and Wales².

In that respect, I would like to bring to your attention the report 'black people, racism, and human rights' produced by the Joint Committee on Human Rights in 2020 under my chairship. This report showed:

- 78% of black women do not believe that their health is equally protected by the NHS compared to white people³.
- While deaths in childbirth in the UK have fallen since 2010, there are significant variations in these statistics based on race. Asian women, mixed ethnicity women and black women are all more likely to die than white women during childbirth, with black women being most at risk⁴.

¹ Women and Equalities Committee Third Report of Session 2022–23. Black maternal health <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/38989/documents/191706/default/>

² Census 2021 Results: Ethnicity, National Identity, Language and Religion

³ Polling commissioned by JCHR. ClearView Research, The Black Community and Human Rights, September 2020 <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt5801/jtselect/jtrights/correspondence/The-Black-Community-Human-Rights-Report.pdf>

⁴ Joint Committee on Human Rights Eleventh Report of Session 2019–21. Black people, racism and human rights <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3376/documents/32359/default/>

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- The NHS's Maternity Transformation Programme, "Better Births" which began in 2016 made no specific commitments in relation to women from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds and there are no targets to end this disparity⁵.
- The Joint Committee on Human Rights proposed that a target must be introduced to end the disparity in maternal mortality between Black women and white women⁶.

To remedy this situation the NHS must set a clear target to close the gap in the ethnic disparity of maternal outcomes. We must address the differential delivery of care that is the experience of too many black women. We must have regular and publicly accessible monitoring of the ethnic disparity in maternal mortality rates. This monitoring is important, so it is particularly disappointing that King's which serves a very diverse community does not publish its maternal mortality disparity data. We must work to close the wider health and social inequalities that exist in our society.

I hope that after consideration of these proposals and in light of their high relevance to families of Southwark that the Southwark Maternity Commission will adopt these proposals.

Please do keep me updated on the progress of the Southwark Maternity Commission and let me know if at any time I can be of assistance to you and your commission as you work towards these important objectives.

Best wishes,

Harriet

Rt. Hon. Harriet Harman KC MP

⁵ Joint Committee on Human Rights Eleventh Report of Session 2019–21. Black people, racism and human rights <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3376/documents/32359/default/>

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