

Description

SORTing Out Research in Midwifery: Why Every Midwife's Voice Matters

Sam Todd – Consultant Midwife for Clinical Effectiveness and Innovation

Socials @sjtodd16

Dr Kerry Evans, Lead Clinical Academic – Nurses, Midwives, Allied Health Professionals

She/her

Mandy Gill, Senior Research Midwife

She/her

All – Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Summary

Midwives contribute to research more often than they may realise, from supporting recruitment to studies to developing and implementing evidence-based care. Yet research can sometimes feel distant from everyday clinical practice. The Self-Assessment of Organisational Readiness Tool (SORT), developed by NHS England, aims to understand how prepared organisations are to support research within healthcare settings. Although designed as an organisational framework, midwives are being asked to complete the survey to provide insight into how research culture is experienced in practice. By sharing their perspectives, midwives can help ensure national research ambitions are informed by frontline realities and support the continued development of research opportunities across maternity services.

Research and Midwifery: more connected than we think

Have you heard of the BUMPES, MAGPIE, CHIPS, COMET or WOMAN trials? Many midwives will recognise at least one of these studies. You may have been involved in recruiting women to a study like these, or you may now be practising based on their findings.

Over the years, many research studies conducted within maternity services have influenced the care we provide, with the aim of improving outcomes and experiences for women and families. Yet we do not always consciously reflect on the relationship between research and midwifery, which in reality is far more connected than we might think.

Evidence-based care and supporting research delivery are key tenets of the NMC Code and of modern maternity practice. Research-active organisations have also been shown to demonstrate improved clinical outcomes, higher staff satisfaction and enhanced organisational performance.[1,2,3,4]

Often, midwives contribute to research in their everyday practice without necessarily recognising it. This might include:

- having conversations with women during pregnancy about being a research-active organisation
- supporting recruitment to studies
- implementing evidence-based guidelines
- participating in quality improvement initiatives
- undertaking audit and evaluation work
- supporting women to make informed choices about their care and options

Research should not feel separate from practice, nor should it be seen as a barrier to safe and effective care. Instead, it should be recognised as an integral part of everyday maternity care.

Perspective from Practice

Mandy Gill, Senior Research Midwife

I believe that midwives play a vital role in supporting maternity research trials due to their close, trusting relationships with women. This enables them to identify suitable participants and guide the research process with compassion, while ensuring procedures are carried out safely and respectfully.

The balance of clinical expertise and a holistic understanding of pregnancy allows midwives to communicate complex information clearly, advocate for women's needs and integrate evidence-based practice.

Together, these qualities contribute to improved outcomes, stronger maternity services and high-quality research, advancing knowledge and supporting better, more personalised care for mothers, babies and families.

What exactly is SORT?

SORT is an acronym for the Self-Assessment of Organisational Readiness Tool. It is a validated framework developed by NHS England to assess and strengthen nursing research capacity within the NHS. While originally developed with nursing in mind, the framework is highly transferable to midwifery and can be used to support the development of midwifery research capacity and culture across maternity services.[5]

The tool helps organisations reflect on how prepared they are to support research within everyday clinical practice. SORT explores several key areas that are known to influence research activity, including:

- leadership and organisational commitment to research
- infrastructure and practical support for research activity
- workforce engagement and awareness of research opportunities
- access to research training and development
- partnerships with academic institutions and research networks

By exploring these domains, SORT aims to understand whether organisations are creating the conditions where research can thrive, enabling clinicians to contribute to the evidence base that ultimately improves care for women, babies and families. However, despite SORT being designed to assess organisational readiness, many midwives may be wondering why they are being asked to complete the tool themselves.

Why are individual midwives being asked to complete it?

Whilst SORT was originally developed as a tool for organisations to undertake a self-assessment of their strategic approach to research and implementation, the online survey can also be completed by individual midwives. This can understandably cause some confusion, as many may assume the tool is intended for managers or senior leaders within

their organisation. Some of the questions also appear framed around organisational systems, which can make the purpose of the survey feel unclear.

However, individual responses provide valuable insight into how research culture is experienced in everyday clinical practice. Your response can help maternity leaders understand:

- awareness of research opportunities
- accessibility of research pathways
- whether staff feel supported to engage in research
- barriers experienced within everyday practice
- identify and address skills gaps

Without the insight of practising midwives, organisational readiness can only ever be partially understood.

It is also helpful to clarify who the survey is intended for. At present, responses are being sought specifically from midwives currently working within NHS maternity services, including those working at provider, Integrated Care Board (ICB), regional or national level.

Capturing perspectives from midwives across these different roles is important, as research culture is shaped not only by local maternity services but also by leadership, strategy and infrastructure across the wider NHS system.

Understanding these perspectives helps ensure that national ambitions for research are grounded in the realities of frontline maternity care.

Bridging the gap between national ambition and frontline reality

Perspective on building research culture

Dr Kerry Evans – Clinical Academic Lead for Midwives, Nurses and Allied Healthcare Professionals

Maternity services operate under significant workforce and clinical pressures, making it essential that midwifery research is aligned with service priorities and women's needs. Research improves safety, quality and innovation in care, but its value can remain under-recognised when not embedded in governance and workforce metrics.

Using the NHS SORT tool, our organisation has strengthened research visibility by integrating metrics into Ward Accreditation, Nursing and Midwifery Cabinet discussions and Board reporting. This enables monitoring of maternity research activity and demonstrates the value of a research-skilled workforce.

Alongside executive support, initiatives such as a Research Academy, mentorship and protected time help midwives engage in research and develop sustainable research-active careers.

In recent years there has been a growing national ambition to strengthen research across the NHS workforce. Within maternity services, this ambition reflects a recognition that improving outcomes for women and babies depends on continuously developing the evidence that underpins our care. However, for many midwives working in busy clinical environments, research can still feel distant from day-to-day practice.

Clinical workload, staffing pressures and competing priorities can make it difficult for midwives to see how research fits within their role. Opportunities to become involved in research may not always be visible, and some midwives may feel that research is something undertaken primarily by academics rather than clinicians. These perceptions can unintentionally create a gap between national strategy and frontline experience.

Encouragingly, this landscape is beginning to change. Across the NHS there is increasing recognition of the importance of developing clinical academic pathways for nurses and midwives, alongside initiatives such as research internships, fellowships and funded postgraduate study. These opportunities aim to support clinicians to develop research skills while remaining grounded in practice.

By strengthening the connection between research, education and clinical care, maternity services can help ensure that research is not seen as an additional task, but as an integral part of improving care for women, babies and families.

Why your response matters

Completing the SORT survey may only take a few minutes, but the collective responses of midwives across the NHS have the potential to inform important conversations about the future of research within maternity services. If you are currently working within NHS maternity services, you can complete the survey here: [Self-Assessment of Organisational Readiness Tool (SORT)].

At a national level, the insights gathered through SORT can help identify where research culture is already thriving and where further support may be needed. This information can help shape future priorities, including workforce development, access to research training, investment in infrastructure and the expansion of clinical academic opportunities for nurses and midwives.

Equally important is ensuring that the experiences of practising midwives are reflected within this picture. If only a small number of responses are received, or if responses come primarily from those already closely involved in research, the results may not fully capture the realities of clinical practice.

By taking a few minutes to share your perspective, you contribute to a broader understanding of how research is experienced across maternity services. These insights can help ensure that future strategies for research and innovation are grounded in the realities of practice and support midwives at every stage of their career.

A small action with big impact

Midwives are central to the ongoing development and improvement of maternity care. Every day, clinical practice is shaped by research that has been generated, tested and implemented within maternity services. Ensuring that midwives continue to play an active role in this process is essential if we are to strengthen the evidence base that underpins the care we provide.

Tools such as SORT offer an opportunity to understand how research is experienced across the profession and where further support may be needed. While completing the survey may feel like a small action, the collective voice of midwives has the potential to influence how research is supported, developed and embedded within maternity services in the future.

If we want research opportunities to grow within midwifery, the perspectives of practising midwives must be part of the conversation. By taking part, midwives can help ensure that national ambitions for research are informed by the realities of frontline maternity care.

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Date Created
19th June 2026