

Issued: 14 September 2023

Minister of Health announces new primary birthing unit at Waitākere Hospital

Today the Minister of Health, Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall, announced that \$12.3 million has been approved to build a primary birthing unit on Waitākere Hospital campus. The development of this unit will provide West Aucklanders with more choices around where to give birth.

Around 2800 babies were born in Waitākere last year and there is a strong demand for expanded birthing options. The construction of this facility will see an increase in capacity of 500 births per year to accommodate the growing needs of the West Auckland community. This will also free up space in the Waitākere Maternity Unit for pregnant people who are unwell and need specialist care.

The new 970 sqm primary birthing facility will include six birthing/postnatal suites, whānau room, education room, staff areas and gardens. It will also include a community breast milk bank to enable more babies to have access to breastmilk, especially the most-vulnerable babies being cared for in the Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU). This will be Auckland's very first community Milk Bank. Milk banks ensure the safe distribution of human breast milk. Breast milk is pasteurised and frozen before being distributed to whānau most in-need.

The unit has been co-designed with the community, clinicians and other key stakeholders. Community midwives will be excited to have a facility close-at-hand; until now, they have had to travel to Warkworth, Helensville Birthing Centre or into the busy city to Birthcare Parnell. A local facility will now be available to them with specialist hospital services nearby if needed.

International and national research shows giving birth in a primary birthing unit is safe and increases the likelihood of vaginal birth. Director of Midwifery Emma Farmer says, "We want to be able to offer women the opportunity to give birth in a home-like environment. This will not be suitable for mothers with complex pregnancies but it will help those with normal pregnancies who want normal births."

There has been a specific focus on meeting the aspirations of Māori, Pacific and teen parents to encourage early engagement with maternity care and to create an environment where people feel welcome and safe in the unit. Pregnant and parenting classes will take place in the unit to encourage a sense of belonging and familiarity prior to the birth.

An urban primary birthing unit has been a long-stated goal of the West Auckland community. The project originated following a 2016 community consultation that involved over 1000 pieces of feedback. During this consultation, Māori, Pacific and teen parents expressed clear ideas about what they would expect from a birthing unit and what facilities they would like to use. This feedback has been incorporated into the design principles.

Construction of the primary birthing unit begins in March 2024 and is expected to be completed in May 2025.

ENDS