

The present system is characterised by the following challenges which the Safe and Sustainable Review was designed to overcome:⁶⁶

- The different NHS services that care for children with congenital heart disease could work together better.
- Clinical expertise is spread too thinly over 11 surgical centres.
- Some centres are reliant on small teams and cannot deliver a safe 24 hour emergency service.
- Smaller centres are vulnerable to sudden and unplanned closure.
- Current arrangements are inequitable to children and their families as there is too much variation in the expertise available from centres.
- Available research evidence identifies a relationship between higher-volume surgical centres and better clinical outcomes.
- Fewer surgical centres are needed to ensure that surgical and medical teams are treating enough children to maintain and develop their specialist skills.
- Having a larger and varied caseload means larger centres are best placed to recruit, mentor and retain new surgeons and plan for the future.
- The delivery of non-surgical cardiology care for children in local hospitals is inconsistent.

The review concluded that without change there is a risk that in the future some children's congenital cardiac surgery services may be neither safe nor sustainable in future.

Clinicians and other experts have advised that children's heart surgery should be provided in fewer NHS hospitals than at present. Increasing the overall number of surgeons is not considered to be the answer, as this would result in surgeons performing fewer surgical procedures and occasional surgical practice will not lead to better clinical outcomes for children.

In 2009, the Children's Heart Federation commissioned an independent expert (Ipsos MORI) to assess the level of support for the review amongst parents of children with congenital heart disease. 5,000 parents were sent questionnaires and 1,000 responses were received. The outcome of this analysis concluded that around 73% of parents who responded either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' on the benefits of reducing the number of units in the NHS that provide cardiac surgery for children.

Further detail on the case for change can be found in the *New Vision for Children's Congenital Heart Services in England* at: http://www.specialisedservices.nhs.uk/safe_sustainable/public-consultation-2011.

⁶⁶ NHS Specialised Services (2011): Op. cit.