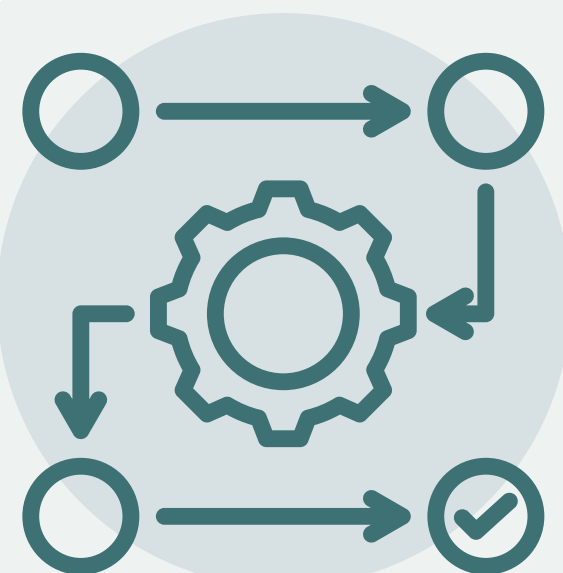


Ethnic disparities in Maternity complaints: Analysing patient engagement with PALS across England

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Study Question

Do women from ethnic minorities face barriers in complaining about their Maternity care?

Background

Improving safety, equity, and experience of care in maternity services remains a core priority across the NHS. Persistent ethnic disparities in maternal outcomes have been widely reported, with women from Black and Asian backgrounds facing higher risks of morbidity and mortality. However, less attention has been given to how these women engage with formal mechanisms for raising concerns or complaints about their care.

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a key route through which NHS users can seek support or raise concerns. Yet, there is currently only limited empirical data on whether women from ethnic minority backgrounds are equally represented in maternity-related PALS activity.

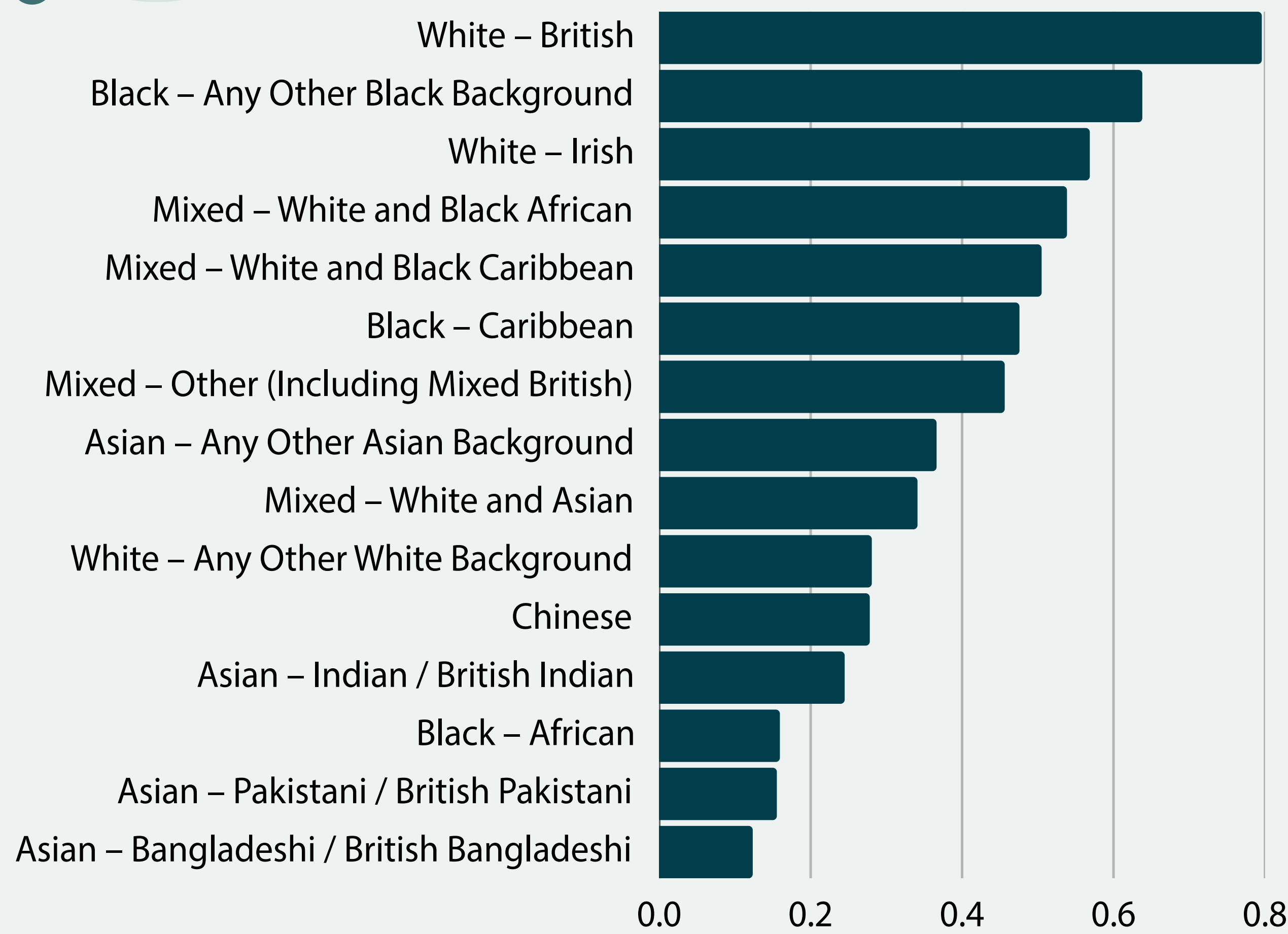
Methods

We conducted an online Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all acute NHS Trusts in England, asking them to provide data on the ethnic background of Maternity patients who had contacted Patient Advice and Liaison Service in the last three full years (1 January 2022 – 31 December 2024).

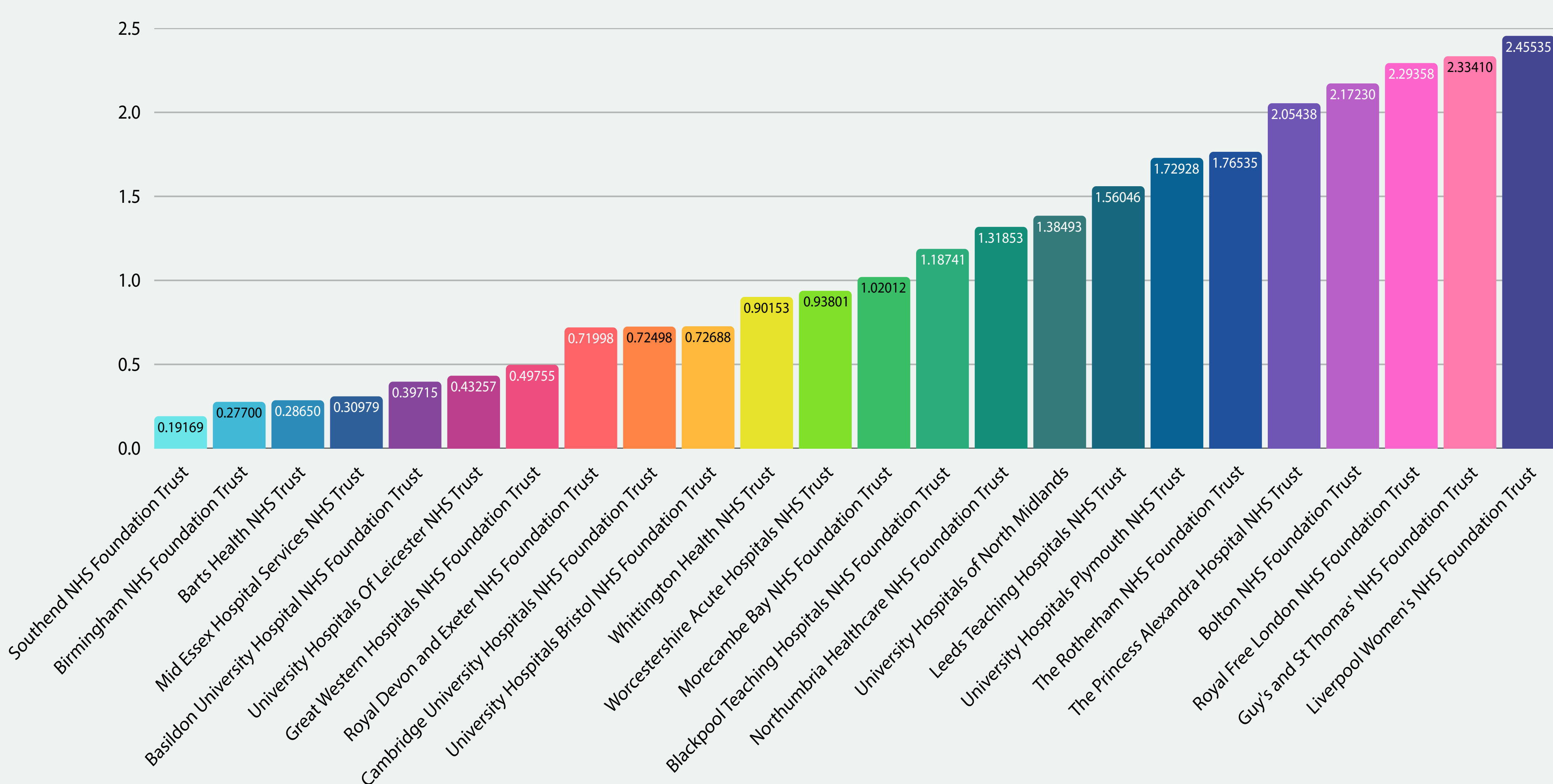


Results

Twenty-four NHS Trusts returned full datasets, totalling over 1.1M encounters and 338,850 births. In the relevant period, there were 8,420 PALS referrals in these 24 Trusts, suggesting that on average about 1 in 40 women contacted PALS whilst under the care of Maternity.



Women identifying as White British were approximately six times more likely to engage with PALS than women identifying as Black African or Bangladeshi.



Large differences exist in terms of number of complaints per delivery, ranging from 1:20 (Liverpool NHS Trust) in some Trusts to 1:400 (Southend NHS Trust) in others.



Conclusions

- **Overall engagement:** On average, around 1 in 40 women receiving maternity care at these Trusts contacted PALS during the study period.
- **Local variation:** Rates of PALS contact varied widely across Trusts, from 1 in 20 to 1 in 400 maternities, likely reflecting differing levels of awareness, accessibility, and cultural relevance of complaints mechanisms.
- **Incomplete data:** Several Trusts were unable to provide ethnicity data for PALS contacts, highlighting gaps in routine data capture that may obscure inequities.
- **Improved data collection:** Trusts should be supported to strengthen their feedback pathways, ensuring they are accessible, inclusive, and culturally responsive for all service users.
- **Trust-building:** Trusts must foster environments where all women believe their concerns will be heard, respected, and acted upon.

