At least 7000 children are born with lifelong physical, behavioural or cognitive disabilities as a result of alcohol consumption during pregnancy according to the British Medical Association. This is called fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

Since FAS was first described in the 1970’s, it has become clear that there is a spectrum of abnormalities resulting from fetal alcohol exposure, not only FAS. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is the umbrella term used to describe this spectrum of abnormalities, with FAS lying at the most severely affected end of the spectrum.

Anne-Marie Winstone told the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorders’ on Tuesday evening about the research she conducted in 2011.

Her study focussed on midwives’ knowledge, practices and opinions regarding advice about FAS, FASD and alcohol intake in pregnancy.

Only about 10 per cent of the participating midwives surveyed defining FAS correctly which is in line with an Australian study. Surprisingly, therefore, 34 per cent of the 624 East Anglian
midwives who participated in Anne-Marie’s survey stated that they had seen an infant with the diagnosis of FAS.

Almost all of the midwives, 93 per cent, stated that: ‘consider not drinking at all’, best represented the advice they would prefer to give pregnant women. But only 20 per cent of midwives informed women with known risk factors about alcohol use suggesting a reluctance to discuss alcohol, figures in Australia were 30 per cent and a Danish study conclusions mirrored the same reluctance.

She told the APPG, chaired by Bill Esterson MP, that UK midwives may find it difficult to discuss these sensitive issues without clear consensus between advisory bodies such as the British Medical Association (BMA) and the National Institute For Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). The BMA guideline is that women completely avoid alcohol in pregnancy whereas the NICE guidelines present a number of different options.

Anne-Marie said: “Children with FAS have a range of developmental, cognitive and communication problems that can benefit from early intervention strategies so it is important that healthcare professionals recognise the features.

“Outcomes would be improved by routinely asking about alcohol consumption and providing alcohol advice to pregnant women as well as identifying and supporting mothers ‘at risk of an alcohol-exposed pregnancy’ as early as possible.

“Midwives clearly stated that they would benefit from readily available information and resources about FAS to help them and pregnant women.

“Previous research has already established that women do not hold it against midwives if no accurate answer exists but women do appreciate frank discussions.”

Anne-Marie added: “An epidemiological study of FASDs across the UK would greatly help to raise awareness and would provide essential data for future UK health service planning.”

Anne-Marie has published a pocket guide for midwives and health professionals.

The APPG will publish a report in December 2015.