



# Impact report

1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024



# Contents

- Our values..... 3
- What we do..... 4
- Why Birth Companions is needed..... 8
- The context in which Birth Companions operates..... 10
- Our frontline services..... 12
- The impact of our services..... 15
- Changing systems, policy and practice..... 18
- Birth Companions’ commitment to climate justice..... 23
- What next?..... 24
- Our funders..... 25

**A note on language**  
We use the words ‘woman’ and ‘mother’ throughout this Impact Report, which reflects the identities of the people we have supported through our services this year. We recognise that not everyone who is pregnant or has recently given birth identifies as a woman or mother. Our services welcome, and our wider commentary includes, anyone who is pregnant or has recently given birth, whatever their gender identity or how they express this.

# Our values

Birth Companions was founded in 1996 to support pregnant women and new mothers in the harsh environment of Holloway Prison. Over the 28 years since, we've become experts in working with women who experience pregnancy and early motherhood in the most challenging and unjust circumstances.

Birth Companions' values have shaped our organisation's approach from the outset and are more important to us than ever. These values give us a guiding light to navigate the difficult contexts in which we work, and the uncertain times we live in.

## ● Birth Companions is a women's organisation built on feminist principles, delivering woman-to-woman support.

Protecting women's rights is central to the way we work. Experiences of trauma have shaped the lives of most of the women we support, and our trauma-informed way of working responds to the particular impact of trauma during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood. We uphold the six principles of trauma-informed practice: **safety, trust, choice, collaboration, empowerment** and **cultural consideration**.

## ● Birth Companions is an anti-racist organisation.

We are committed to being an inclusive, diverse, culturally competent and anti-racist organisation that acknowledges and takes action against structural, institutional and interpersonal racism. We recognise this needs to be rooted in action within our organisation and in our external activities.

## ● Birth Companions is a sustainable organisation.

We recognise we have a collective duty to act now to mitigate the impact of the climate and nature emergency on future generations. Our environmental policy sets out Birth Companions' practical response to the climate emergency through making choices that mean the charity has less impact on the environment. We act as a leader in our field by sharing information, policy and best practice in this area, and by encouraging other organisations to act with us.

## ● We are on a journey.

We will continue to learn and improve our practice to ensure these values are borne out through Birth Companions' work.

# What we do

Birth Companions aims to improve the lives of women who experience severe disadvantage and inequity in pregnancy and early motherhood, and their babies.

Our approach is built on three pillars:

1. Our frontline services
2. Our Lived Experience Team
3. Our policy & influencing work



## 1. Our frontline services

Birth Companions' frontline services, in prisons around England and in the community in London and the South East, support women through pregnancy, birth and in the first two years of their child's life. We also support women through abortion, miscarriage, and stillbirth. We focus on women experiencing severe disadvantage and inequity, particularly those in contact with the criminal justice, immigration, and children's social care systems.

Our frontline services are delivered by a small team of dedicated and specialist staff who bring a wealth of experience, knowledge and care to their roles. Several of our staff have worked with us for many years, building up notable expertise in delivering trauma-informed, woman-centred, and non-judgemental support within highly complex systems and settings. Our trained volunteers, peer supporters and sessional workers are also essential to our frontline service delivery, bringing an invaluable combination of lived and learned experience to their direct support of individual women.

### We offer:

- Emotional support
- Advocacy support
- Essential items for women and their babies
- Information and resources
- Referrals and introductions to other organisations to help address wider issues (e.g. housing, immigration)
- Birth preparation and birth support
- Postnatal support
- Support before, during and after separation from a baby
- Breastfeeding and infant feeding support
- Pregnancy and mother and baby groups
- Peer support.

## 2. Our Lived Experience Programme

Women with lived experience of severe disadvantage and inequity during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood hold huge power to change their own and others women's lives.

Bringing their expertise together with the learned experience of volunteers, staff, partners and collaborators, we work to challenge, disrupt and remake the unequal power structures that act upon women, their families and their communities, in order to drive positive change.

This work is managed across every part of the organisation by our trauma-informed Lived Experience Programme:

*"I've often thought about the Birth Companions Lived Experience Team as my form of therapy. When I was looking after my daughter in prison on a Mother and Baby Unit, I think I was just focusing on getting through the time...And so, moving forward, coming out and having the opportunity to be a part of a Lived Experience Team, it has sort of allowed me to actually go through the deep-rooted feelings that maybe I compressed at the time...Being able to go through this so-called therapy, and in the midst of all of that, also being able to help others? It's an extremely refreshing feeling. It's done a lot for my mental health; it's contributed in a positive way. Birth Companions have allowed me to be free in my mind, to be free with what I've been through. I've had the opportunity to not just have lived it, but now to speak about how I got through it."*

**Member of the Lived Experience Team, 2024**

### Engaging with women in our services

Women using our services are supported to:

- Shape the services they and others receive from Birth Companions.
- Reflect on their experience of services provided by other agencies, such as maternity or social care, and communicate their concerns or share ideas for improvement with those in positions of power.

### Engaging with our Lived Experience Team

When women are no longer using our services, they can join our Lived Experience Team (LET) where they are supported to:

- Drive improvements in external services, systems, strategy, policy and research through paid consultancy opportunities
- Shape Birth Companions' strategy and services
- Support Birth Companions' governance through advisory and trustee roles.

## 3. Our policy and influencing work

Birth Companions' services are needed because deep-rooted issues such as poverty, discrimination, the housing crisis, 'hostile environment' immigration policies and social isolation create such significant inequities, and because there is a lack of holistic, statutory support for women and their families.

Our policy and influencing team draws together learning and expertise from our Lived Experience Programme, our services and our network of partners, to drive systemic and structural change to address these wider issues.

This flow of learning and development works both ways: we also use new learning from our policy and research to improve our services and our Lived Experience Programme.

### We drive positive changes for women and babies through:

- Developing and contributing to policy
- Publishing guidance and resources for women and the professionals working with them
- Shaping and contributing to the work of the media
- Coordinated campaigns
- Publishing reports, articles, podcasts and contributions to books
- Shaping, undertaking and/or commissioning academic research
- Developing and contributing to training for professionals
- Working with legal professionals to improve access to justice in criminal, civil and family law
- Consultancy, including service co-design and co-production
- Hosting and speaking at networking events and conferences.

# Why Birth Companions is needed

We work with women and babies living in very difficult, complex situations, which create significant risks to their health and wellbeing. Mothers often have to navigate failing maternity services alongside involvement from the criminal justice, social care, and/or immigration systems. All too often, these systems do not work together around a woman to meet her needs during pregnancy and early motherhood. We focus on the ways these complex systems impact women's lives, and identify gaps, failings, and opportunities to drive change.

**65% of the women we support have involvement from children's social care**

The number of babies and infants subject to care proceedings is growing,<sup>1</sup> while outcomes for mothers with social care involvement are getting worse. The health of many mothers in these situations is poor, and their treatment is often unfair. MBRRACE-UK's latest maternal mortality report<sup>2</sup> found that 21% of the women who died in pregnancy, birth or the year after birth were known to social care, up from 12% in 2012-14.

11% of those who died by suicide and 59% of those who died through substance misuse had had an infant removed into care and/or ongoing care proceedings.

**67% of the women we support are caught up in the criminal justice system**

In 2023/24, 229 pregnant women were held in prisons in England, and 53 women gave birth to babies while held in custody – a significant increase on the previous year.<sup>3</sup> While 52 of these births took place in hospital, one woman gave birth either in transit to hospital, or while still in prison. An unknown number of mothers are separated from their babies by imprisonment each year. The NHS categorises every pregnancy in prison as high risk because of the nature of the environment. Research shows high levels of missed midwifery and obstetric appointments, increased rates of premature birth, low birth weight, stillbirth and neonatal unit admissions among women in custody compared to those in the community.<sup>4</sup> Three babies born to women in custody in recent years have died during or shortly after birth.<sup>5</sup>



**11% of the women we support have contact with the immigration system**

Women with insecure immigration status are subject to many 'hostile environment' policies. They face the threat of huge charges for accessing maternity care, and experience poor quality and unsafe housing; frequent relocation at short notice; huge language and literacy barriers; and extreme social isolation.

<sup>1</sup> Broadhurst, K., Alrouh, B. et al. (2018) Born into Care: Newborns in care proceedings in England, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

<sup>2</sup> MBRRACE-UK (2023) Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care - Lessons learned to inform maternity care from the UK and Ireland. Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths and Morbidity 2019-21, Oxford: National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Justice (2024) HMPPS Annual Digest 2023/24.

<sup>4</sup> Nuffield Trust (2022) Inequality on the inside.

<sup>5</sup> Inside Time (15 July 2024) Another baby dies in an English prison.

# Why Birth Companions is needed

The women we work with experience multiple, intersecting challenges during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood.

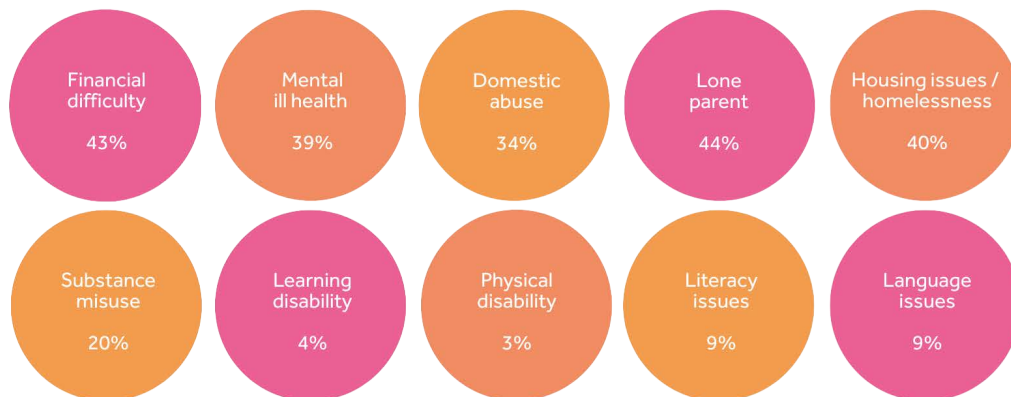
We take a holistic, woman-centred and trauma-informed approach to everything we do. We make sure women feel safe and supported; that they experience no judgment or stigma in the spaces we create with them; and that they choose how and when they engage with us.

This means that, unlike many services, we do not systematically gather data from women on the specifics of their situations. Women disclose what they want to disclose, when they want to disclose it.

Instead, our staff work to build trusting and strong relationships with women over time, and are led by each individual to the issues she wants to discuss. When specific experiences are shared with our staff and volunteers, they are recorded in order to build up a picture of needs and challenges among the women we support.

This approach to mapping the needs of women across our services means that our data is non-comparative, and likely to under-report the true extent of the disadvantage and inequity that women face. Nevertheless, we believe it is helpful to reflect on the needs we are able to map.

## Health and social factors



## Contact with systems



# The context in which Birth Companions operates

**Fourteen years of austerity, the Covid-19 pandemic, cruel immigration policy, and the skyrocketing cost of living** have heaped harm on top of harm for pregnant women and new mothers facing severe disadvantage and inequity. Birth Companions has worked tirelessly throughout this time to support women, and call attention to the systemic and structural inequities that make their lives, and the lives of their children, so much harder than they should be.

**Deep inequalities persist in maternal and neonatal outcomes.** Mothers who are Black or Asian, those who are living in deprived areas, and those who are in contact with social care are more likely to die in pregnancy, labour, or the year after birth.<sup>1</sup> Black babies living in the most deprived areas are almost three times as likely to be stillborn than white babies from the least deprived areas.<sup>2</sup>

**The prison system is broken, yet the number of women in prisons continues to rise.**<sup>3</sup> As a result, pregnant women and mothers of infants are being put at greater and greater risk, often locked in cells for more than 22 hours a day,<sup>4</sup> their access to essential healthcare and services severely restricted. More than a third of pregnant women in prisons are held there on remand,<sup>5</sup> and women continue to give birth while inside prison walls or in transit to hospital.<sup>6</sup>

**A severe lack of support also persists across the wider criminal justice system.** Pregnant women and mothers of infants who are on probation, and those who are serving sentences or awaiting sentencing in the community, are all too often unable to access vital support to address the root causes of offending – poverty, unmet mental health needs, and experiences of trauma and abuse. Instead, services continue to criminalise and condemn women and girls facing some of the most challenging circumstances.

**Tens of thousands of women have contact with the children's social care system** during pregnancy and early motherhood each year, and the rates of newborn babies subject to care proceedings continues to rise.<sup>7</sup> Thousands of mothers have their baby removed from their care by the family courts: 5,450 infants under the age of one began being 'looked after' by the State in 2023.<sup>8</sup>

1 MBRRACE-UK (2023) Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care.

2 MBRRACE-UK (2024). MBRRACE-UK perinatal mortality surveillance - UK perinatal deaths of babies born in 2022. State of the nation report.

3 MoJ. (2024). Offender management statistics quarterly.

4 HMIP. (2023). HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales: Annual Report 2022–23.

5 Summers, H. (2023). Revealed: one in three jailed pregnant women in England and Wales still to face trial. The Observer.

6 MoJ. (2023). Official Statistics Bulletin: HMPPS Annual Digest 2022/23.

7 Pattinson, R. et al. (2021). Newborn babies in urgent care proceedings in England and Wales. NFJO.

8 DfE. (2023). Children looked after in England including adoption: 2022-2023.

## The context in which Birth Companions operates

**We know that things do not have to be this way; that change is possible.**

In addition to direct support for women, Birth Companions has been working hard for nearly 30 years to drive improvements in the care women receive across services; and in the policies that shape how that care is organised, funded and delivered.

As you will read further on in this Impact Report, we helped drive some really significant changes in over the past year, that will make a tangible difference to the lives of women and babies.

**We will continue to call attention to the way in which structural inequity and severe disadvantage impact on pregnant women, mothers and infants.**

Campaigning to achieve social and reproductive justice for women and girls is a fundamental focus of our work, and we look forward to working to ensure the new Government and all systems and services prioritise equity and justice in all policies.





# Our frontline services in 2023/24



From 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, we supported:

130

women and birthing  
people in prisons in  
England

60

women through our  
Peer Support services  
in prisons

131

women and birthing  
people in the  
community in  
London and the  
South East

38

women through our  
Community Criminal  
Justice Perinatal  
Support service

29

women through our  
Community Birth  
service

48

women through our  
Community Postnatal  
services

55

women through our  
Community Antenatal  
services

This year, we supported **61** women during separation from their baby.

We provided practical support to **127** women. This included taxis for travelling to or from hospital, phone credit, nursing bras and wellbeing packs, and supplying **53** baby boxes, containing everything a woman needs for her baby in the first two weeks after birth, through our partner charity Pram Depot.

We provided support to perinatal women in HMP Bronzefield and HMP Foston Hall through peer support, one-to-one and group-based services. We also delivered our bespoke peer supporter training to women in HMP Drake Hall, and offered ad hoc continuity support to women transferred there from HMP Foston Hall.



Involvement from children's social care has been a dominant theme underpinning the needs and concerns of many women we supported throughout 2023/24, both in prisons and in the community.

Our probation-linked service, run through a partnership with Advance Charity, has continued to grow, offering support to pregnant women and mothers of infants in the community across London and the South East who have involvement from the criminal justice system – for example, while under probation supervision, or while serving community orders. This work has required intensive and sustained support for women around children's social care involvement, and a significant amount of advocacy work within the social care system, and we have had some real successes in supporting women to retain or regain care of their infants.

In the prisons we work in, our staff, volunteers, and trained peer supporters have delivered specialist support to pregnant women and those on Mother and Baby Units, and have continued their important work to support better identification of women who are separated from their babies while in custody. Through our regular group sessions, we have been able to identify and explore issues relating to the physical and mental healthcare received by women in pregnancy and early motherhood in prison, including those who have experienced miscarriage and those accessing abortion services

Housing continues to be a significant issue for women we support in the community, and those leaving prison. Our service coordinators have undertaken a significant amount of advocacy and referrals work in relation to housing this year. In several cases, we have been able to support women to access appropriate housing on release from prison, avoiding potential homelessness and/or separation from their infants due to lack of housing provision.





### **Adapting our community services**

This year we made some changes to how we structure our services in the community, to better reflect the support needs and preferences of the women we have been working with.

We have moved from offering a weekly, in-person antenatal group, to a more flexible, individualised way of working with women during pregnancy. This new model is proving popular. It allows our service coordinators to meet one-to-one with women at times and places that suit them, while continuing to provide remote support (via phone, text, and post) as needed. As well as receiving emotional and practical support, women can work through our tailored antenatal education packs with our staff or in their own time.

Volunteers play a key role in the delivery of our community birth support service and mother and baby groups in London. This includes one-to-one support for women during labour and birth; practical and emotional support after their babies are born; and working with women to identify and visit services they may like to move on to after their baby reaches the age limit for our group sessions.

We continue to receive referrals to our services from a wide range of professionals, including midwives, social workers, children's centres and other voluntary sector organisations. Some women refer themselves to our community services after finding us online or hearing about us through their own networks, or after having been supported by us through a previous pregnancy or birth.



# The impact of our services



## Improving mental health and wellbeing

100%

of the women who provided feedback felt our support had helped improve their mental wellbeing

96%

said our support helped them to feel less worried or stressed

96%

said our support helped them to feel more positive

98%

said our support helped them to feel more valued and respected

“ Birth Companions has been the support that I very much needed in the community but could not find. I have been through some life changing events since arriving in prison. Birth Companions gave me the strength not to give up on my son and also to not give up on myself. I have only been reunited with my son for two weeks but it has been the best two weeks of my life. ”

“ Birth Companions has helped me gain strengths, confidence and be strong mentally. Meeting other mothers and volunteers really reduced the level of my stress, and I loved the delicious food at the group. ”

“ Birth Companions have been literal lifesavers and were my main source of support at a very overwhelming/daunting time. The group gave me confidence, and opportunities to learn and be around other adults. And sometimes just a moment to breathe or vent. ”

“ Birth Companions was a godsend, all of the support. I was at my lowest and they all made me feel safe. I was looked after and treated with respect. ”



### Reducing isolation

94%

of the women who provided feedback felt we had helped them to feel less isolated

98%

said they felt more supported and cared for

89%

said our support had helped them to feel more confident about contacting other services

88%

said they felt more connected to other women

“ I really valued my time in the antenatal group, with other women who were going through a similar experience. I would like face to face meetings more frequently. ”

“ The distraction materials I received from Birth Companions were very useful, particularly because the regime in prison has been so restricted, and I have had to spend a lot of time in my room. ”

“ I am very happy to come and mingle at the mum and baby group. It helped me feel less lonely when my baby was little. I am so happy here, I have enjoyed coming every week. ”

“ From the moment Birth Companions made contact with me, I was speechless, overwhelmed with the help I received when I didn't have anybody. They were there for me and even went beyond and extended their support when I left the hospital and stayed in temporary accommodation. They are friendly, positive, approachable, professional and very reassuring. ”

“ They felt like family. I felt less alone. ”



## Enabling women to give their babies the best possible start in life

**100%**

of women felt our support had helped them to give their babies a better start in life

**96%**

said we helped them know more about pregnancy, birth and the choices they could make about their care

**93%**

said our services helped them feel more confident in making decisions for themselves and their babies

**93%**

said we helped them to understand more about looking after themselves and their babies

“ The support I received in my labour was amazing. The volunteer really stood up for me when the hospital tried to do things without asking me. When I knew support was on its way, it gave me hope and it felt like a safety net was coming. The volunteer remembered everything from my birth plan and was able to help me get what I needed, she spoke up for me when the hospital were not listening to me. ”

“ It was so valuable to have someone by my side who wanted to support me, also help me straight after my baby's birth, helping me change and dress my baby. ”

## The quality of our services

**97%**

of women said they were very satisfied with the support they received from Birth Companions

“ The support has made me feel more prepared and ready to be a mum. ”

“ The volunteer who helped me during birth and post birth was incredible. Her help will always be remembered and eternally appreciated. ”



# Changing systems, policy and practice



---

In 2023/24, our efforts to change systems and improve policy and practice included work on sentencing guidelines, establishing key principles of care for women at risk of separation or separated from their baby, co-designing an innovative new service for women with social care involvement in East London, and protections for pregnant women seeking asylum in the UK.

---





In March 2024, the Sentencing Council announced that pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period would be included as a specific mitigating factor<sup>1</sup> to be considered by magistrates and Crown Court judges in sentencing decisions.

The Council's decision came off the back of research carried out in 2022,<sup>2</sup> looking at issues of equality and diversity in sentencing. Birth Companions contributed to that research, and were the first to argue for the need for a specific mitigating factor to make sure sentencers consider women's pregnancies, births, and postnatal care.

In November 2023, Birth Companions responded to the Sentencing Council's consultation on the draft mitigating factor,<sup>3</sup> emphasising the evidence on risk, advocating to strengthen the focus on the postnatal period, and centring the voices of women with lived experience of imprisonment during pregnancy and early motherhood. We also produced a briefing document to support a wide range of other organisations and individuals to formulate their own response to the consultation. As a result, our recommendations were endorsed in several other submissions, and noted in the Sentencing Council's final response.

The new mitigating factor came into effect on 1 April 2024. It states that sentencers should address a number of issues "*when considering a custodial or community sentence for a pregnant or postnatal [person] (someone who has given birth in the previous 12 months)*", including the effect of the sentence on the woman's physical or mental health, and any effect of the sentence on the baby. Courts are directed to address these issues when giving reasons for the sentence decided upon. Following our recommendations, the factor also makes specific reference to the harmful impacts of separating a mother and child in the first two years of life.

"The impact of custody on an offender who is pregnant or postnatal can be harmful for both the offender and the child including by separation, especially in the first two years of life."  
**The Sentencing Council's Mitigating factor on pregnancy, childbirth and postnatal care, March 2024**

"This is a huge step forward by the Sentencing Council, and a clear acknowledgement of the risks the prison system poses to pregnant women, new mothers and their babies. We are delighted that they have listened to us, and our many supporters, in choosing to take this step, which should result in fewer pregnant women and mothers being sent to prison. We hope this will pave the way for further reform."  
**Naomi Delap, Director at Birth Companions**

<sup>1</sup> Sentencing Council (2024) Miscellaneous amendments to sentencing guidelines: Response to consultation.

<sup>2</sup> Chen, Q. et al. (2023) Equality and diversity in the work of the Sentencing Council. The University of Hertfordshire.

<sup>3</sup> Birth Companions (2023) Submission to the Sentencing Council consultation 2023: Miscellaneous amendments to sentencing guidelines.

## Changing systems, policy and practice

### The Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care



The number of babies and infants subject to care proceedings is growing, while outcomes for mothers with social care involvement are getting worse as they fall between gaps in fragmented and overstretched services. As a result, women and their babies are being let down.


Birth Companions launched our new *Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care*<sup>1</sup> in July 2023, to help bring greater attention to the needs of women who are almost entirely overlooked in national policy and guidance in the health, social care and family justice systems.

Our Birth Charter sets out how services and systems in England should support all women involved with children's social care from conception to their child's second birthday. We outline fourteen principles to inform and shape policy, commissioning, and professional practice, and to support advocacy. In the Charter, we also launched our call for a new joint, national health and social care pathway for pregnant women and mothers of infants who are subject to pre-birth or parenting assessment, or child protection proceedings.

The Birth Charter was developed in close collaboration with members of the Birth Companions Lived Experience Team who have experience of children's social care involvement during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood; and with invaluable input from 4PB Family Law Barristers, MSB Solicitors, the Association of Child Protection Professionals (AoCPP), and the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University.

"Birth Companions' Birth Charter clearly shows how some of the most vulnerable women in our communities can be let down by those involved in their care and support. ... We support the need for a new national health and social care pathway in England for women with involvement from children's social care."

**The Royal College of Midwives (RCM) and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG)**



Summary of the principles

Pregnant women and mothers of children under the age of two with involvement from children's social care should

Receive support that is

- 1 Specialist and continuous during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood
- 2 Woman-centred, holistic and culturally appropriate
- 3 Trauma-informed and trauma-responsive
- 4 Equitable
- 5 Responsive to their specific needs before, during and after separation from their baby

Be helped to give their babies the best start in life through

- 6 Support from all services as early as possible
- 7 Appropriate mental health support
- 8 Having their birth choices respected
- 9 Appropriate support in hospital before, during and after birth
- 10 Opportunities to bond with their baby
- 11 Receiving or regaining care of their baby where possible

Have their rights upheld through

- 12 Help to understand and engage with every aspect of their involvement with children's social care and the family justice system
- 13 Access to independent advocacy support
- 14 Clear ways to express concerns, challenge inaccuracies and make complaints about unfair or poor practice

<sup>1</sup> Birth Companions (2023) Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care



## Changing systems, policy and practice

### The Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care



We held a launch event for the Birth Charter, generously hosted by 4PB Family Law Barristers, at which members of our Lived Experience Team shared their own reflections on the development of the Charter, and their hopes for future changes in policy and practice. We also had speeches from Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families in England, and Family Court Judge HHJ Madeleine Reardon.

In the months since the publication of the Birth Charter, Birth Companions has been driving conversations forward with stakeholders nationally, regionally and locally, to support the development of joint health and social care pathways for pregnant women and new mothers at risk of separation from their babies. This work continues into 2024/25.

Alongside our work on the Birth Charter, in 2023/24 we co-designed a new service for women experiencing, or at risk of, separation from their babies in East London.<sup>1</sup> This service builds on the principles of the Birth Charter, and was co-designed with women with lived experience of involvement from children's social care, and over 40 professionals working across maternity, perinatal mental health, children's social care and voluntary services in Hackney. This service has since been commissioned for a four-year pilot,<sup>2</sup> and launched in May 2024. This pilot will be independently evaluated, and we look forward to sharing insights from it in 2024/25 and beyond.

"Today we see a great milestone towards family justice. I am very happy to support this Charter as a signpost to us all, that we can do great things collectively to support women and their families throughout pregnancy, those crucial early years and beyond. ... As the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, I will continue to champion the rights of families to stay together and fully support Birth Companions in their ambitious and principled endeavours."

**Isabelle Trowler, Chief Social Worker for Children and Families in England**

"I have been delighted to support Birth Companions in the development of this Birth Charter. ... For a number of years Birth Companions has been doing outstanding work to highlight the impact of trauma on women in the criminal justice system. I very much hope this Charter has a similar effect within the family justice system and children's social care; and that it helps to strengthen good practice and collaborative working, not just among professionals but between them and the families they serve."

**HHJ Madeleine Reardon, Family Court Judge**

<sup>1</sup> Birth Companions (2023) Co-designing a new support service for women who are experiencing or at risk of the removal of their baby at birth by children's social services

<sup>2</sup> Birth Companions (2023) Birth Companions launches new support service for women with involvement from children's social care.

## Changing systems, policy and practice

### The 72-hour time limit on the detention of pregnant women



The 72-hour time limit on the detention of pregnant women was introduced in 2016, in direct response to evidence of the huge risks and impacts of detaining pregnant women, and thanks to campaigning by Birth Companions, Women for Refugee Women, and many others.

In the spring of 2023, Women for Refugee Women, Birth Companions, Medical Justice, Royal College of Midwives, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the British Medical Association, and Maternity Action again launched a joint campaign against cruel and extremely dangerous proposals in the then-Government's so-called 'Illegal' Migration Bill to remove the vital 72-hour protection introduced in 2016 and permit the indefinite detention of pregnant women seeking asylum.

Our joint briefing<sup>1</sup> and 'Write to your MP' campaign<sup>2</sup> gained significant media attention. Baroness Lister tabled an amendment in the House of Lords to maintain the 72-hour limit, for which the Lords voted resoundingly in favour.

In July 2023, the then-Government finally agreed to maintain the 72-hour time limit on the detention of pregnant women seeking sanctuary in the UK. This small but vital amendment to the Bill protects pregnant women and their unborn babies from the harms of indefinite detention.

**"That detention has an incontrovertibly deleterious effect on the health of pregnant women and their unborn children...I take to be a statement of the obvious."**

**Stephen Shaw, former Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, 2016**

**"There can be no doubt that the "Illegal Migration Bill" will compromise the health, safety, and wellbeing of women and their babies."**

**Birth Companions, and Women for Refugee Women, in the BMJ, May 2023**



**Medical Justice**  
working for health rights for detainees



<sup>1</sup> Women for Refugee Women et al. (2023) Joint briefing on the 'Illegal Migration Bill'.

<sup>2</sup> Birth Companions (2023) Write to your MP to stand up and speak out against cruel 'Illegal Migration Bill' plans.



# Birth Companions' commitment to climate justice

Birth Companions acknowledges the urgent threat the climate and biodiversity emergency presents to human life, and in particular to the lives of the mothers and babies we have supported and will continue to support.

We recognise we have a collective duty to act now to mitigate the impact of this crisis, as part of our commitment to providing mothers and babies with the best futures, whatever their circumstances.

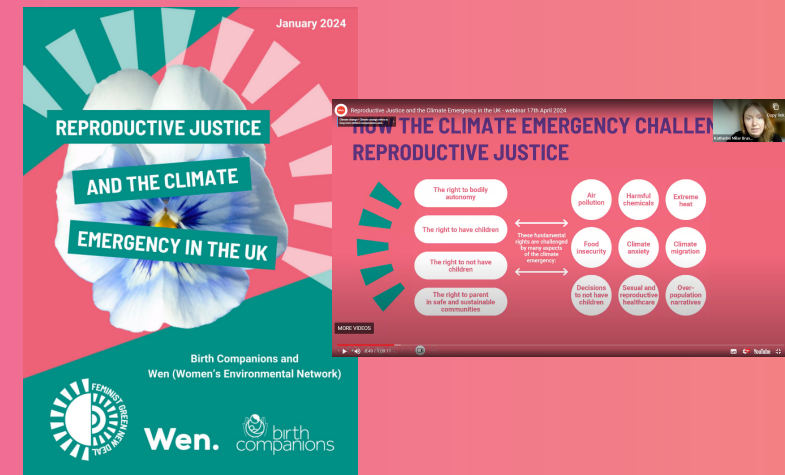
We acknowledge that the negative impacts of climate change and biodiversity decline are disproportionately borne by persons and communities already in disadvantaged situations owing to geography, poverty, gender, age, disability, cultural or ethnic background. These are also the people who have historically contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions and the destruction of the natural world.

There are inextricable links between climate change and economic inequality, racism, and the restriction of reproductive rights. We therefore view efforts to address climate change and reverse the destruction of the natural world as an essential part of our work to achieve systemic change for women facing disadvantage and inequality.

Alongside our policy and campaigning work, Birth Companions is committed to ensuring our organisational and personal practices have a positive social and environmental impact. We recognise that staff have an important role to play in responding to the urgent challenge of climate change, and we aim to encourage our employees to 'walk the talk' when it comes to sustainability behaviour, in line with our organisational values and policies.

<sup>1</sup> Birth Companions and Wen. (2023) Reproductive justice and the climate emergency in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> Birth Companions and Wen. (2023) Reproductive Justice and the Climate Emergency in the UK: Free Lunchtime Webinar.



In February 2024, we published our joint policy paper<sup>1</sup> with Wen (Women's Environmental Network), looking at the implications of the climate emergency for reproductive justice in the UK. In the paper, we interrogate specific challenges brought about by the climate emergency, and demonstrate the myriad ways in which the climate emergency undermines our human rights in the UK today. This paper formed part of Wen's Feminist Green New Deal (FGND) policy paper series, and features a foreword by Dr Ranee Thakar, President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

In April 2024, we hosted a webinar<sup>2</sup> celebrating the publication of this joint policy paper. Over 100 people joined the webinar live and it has been watched a further 100 times since on our YouTube channel. We know there is a way to go in mobilising the environmental and women's sectors on the issues relating to reproductive justice and the climate emergency, but we are proud to be leading the way on these vital and urgent conversations with our partners at Wen.

# What next?

In the Spring of 2024, Birth Companions began a Strategic Review, which is shaping a new plan to guide our work over the next five years.

This plan will be shared in due course, and will include some exciting new announcements for Birth Companions' next chapter...



# Thank you to our funders

Adrian Swire Charitable Trust  
Advance Charity  
Bromley Trust  
Brown Dog  
Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust  
City & Hackney Population Health Hub  
Crucible Foundation  
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation  
Evan Cornish Foundation  
GSK Kings Fund Impact Award  
Inner Circle Consulting  
IVAR  
Kings College University  
London Borough of Hackney  
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine  
Ministry of Justice  
National Lottery  
National Women's Justice Coalition

North East London Integrated Care Board  
Oxford University  
Practice Plus Group Health and Rehabilitation  
PramDepot  
Rayne Foundation  
Real Birth Company  
Revolving Doors  
Samaritans  
Sands and Tommy's Policy Unit  
Segelman Trust  
Sharegift  
Sodexo  
The Big Give Foundation  
University of Birmingham  
University of East Anglia  
University of Hertfordshire  
Women's Environmental Network

And thank you to the large number of generous individuals who supported our work through donations and by taking part in fundraising events.

