



Impact report

1st April 2021 – 31st March 2022

Our work

Birth Companions was founded in 1996 to support pregnant women and new mothers in the harsh environment of Holloway Prison. Over the 26 years since, we've developed an expertise in working with women who experience pregnancy and early motherhood in the most difficult and disadvantaged circumstances, and have become the UK's leading organisation in this field.

Our work aims to improve the lives of mothers and babies by:

- improving the mental health and well-being of pregnant women and new mothers
- enabling new mothers to give their babies the best possible start in life
- empowering women to fulfil their potential through engagement
- driving improvements in the local and national policy and practice that impacts on mothers and their babies.

By working towards these aims, we hope that all women who face disadvantage and inequality during this crucial point in their lives will have the support they need to give their baby the best possible start, and to fulfil their own potential, whatever their circumstances.

Birth Companions' values have shaped the organisation's approach from the outset and are still as important to us as ever. We are a women's organisation built on feminist principles, delivering woman-to-woman support. Choice, empowerment and protecting women's rights have always been central to the way we work. Women choose whether or not to engage with us and our support is always unconditional. We provide women with evidence-based information and support them with their choices.

Our trauma-informed approach

Birth Companions has always been a trauma-informed organisation, as experiences of trauma have shaped the lives of most of the women we support. The way we work responds to the particular impact of trauma during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood, and the challenging situations in which we support women. We build trusted relationships; help women to feel safe; and support others involved in their care to understand how experiences of trauma might affect women's responses and choices. We have championed the value of this approach, and supported others to adopt trauma-informed practice for over a quarter of a century.

The need

The women we support face a range of challenges which can often make their pregnancy and the birth of their baby a time of anxiety, stress and hardship. These can include:

- Mental ill-health
- Insecure housing and homelessness
- Substance and alcohol misuse
- Involvement with the criminal justice system
- Contact with social services
- Experience of domestic violence
- A history of sexual abuse
- Immigration issues
- Poverty
- Isolation

Many of those we work with experience several of these issues at the same time, making them particularly vulnerable. By engaging with women at this stage in their lives we have an opportunity to break long-standing and intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. We know the right support at the right time can make a huge difference to outcomes for mothers and their babies, but their needs are often misunderstood or overlooked by service providers and policy makers.

A summary of our work in 2021-22

During 2021 we marked our 25th anniversary which provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on the development of our services in that time, our response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of our work to shape and improve policy and practice.



We continued to deliver frontline support to women in our prison and community-based services. We also led a major public campaign to end the imprisonment of pregnant women; helped shape new guidelines on state intervention at birth through new-born care proceedings; hosted a major national conference on the intersection of the criminal and family justice systems; and supported many members of our Lived Experience Team as they took part in a range of projects to improve the care of pregnant women and mothers of infants facing disadvantage and inequality.



The support we offered

From 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022 we supported:

- **123** women and **2** birthing people in prisons in England
 - **31** women through our Peer Support services in prisons
- **122** women in the community in London and the South East
 - **22** women through our new Probation service
 - **44** women through our community Antenatal services
 - **48** women through our community Birth service
 - **29** women through our community Postnatal services
- We supported **33** women during separation from their baby; more than twice the number supported last year.

As services in both the prisons and the community adapted to the end of pandemic-related restrictions, we were able to restart our antenatal classes and mother and baby groups in London, see women one-to-one, attend births, and start visiting prisons again. We have also been able to maintain a greater level of remote support, in line with the preferences of some women and appropriate to their circumstances. This has allowed us to sustain high levels of engagement across a high caseload.

"Birth Companions has supported me in all ways mentally, physically and I am so glad to have all the support I needed during labour and after giving birth. I can't thank them enough, their support and kindness, I'll always appreciate and never forget."

The women and babies we have supported

The women we work with face a range of issues which can adversely affect their pregnancies and early motherhood:

- Financial difficulties (88%)
- Lone Parent (66%)
- Domestic Abuse (64%)
- Mental Health (63%)
- Social Services Involvement (62%)
- Housing Issues (59%)
- Substance Misuse (29%)
- Uncertain immigration status (21%)
- Language Issues (21%)
- Time Spent in Care (10%)



Supporting women in prison

In the last year we have provided support to women and birthing people in HMP Bronzefield, HMP Foston Hall and HMP Peterborough through peer support, one-to-one and group-based services. We have also offered remote support to women in HMP Eastwood Park, HMP Downview, HMP New Hall and HMP Send.

Our trained peer supporters and staff have been able to work with prisons to identify higher numbers of women separated from infants in the community, and the involvement of children's social services has continued to be a dominant theme in the needs and concerns of women in our caseloads. Through our regular focus group sessions, we have been able to identify and explore issues relating to the healthcare received by women in pregnancy and early motherhood in custody.

Supporting women in the community

This year we began delivering a new service for pregnant women and mothers of infants under probation supervision in London and the South East region¹. The service has proven very successful, with women engaging at a higher rate than expected².

¹ This service is delivered in collaboration with Advance as part of the London Women's Services Alliance and is co-commissioned by HMPPS and the London Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC).

² Of 24 referrals to the service, 22 have gone on to receive support from Birth Companions, despite the challenges often experienced by services trying to make and sustain contact with women under probation supervision.

We have been able to restart our specialist antenatal classes and mother and baby groups in London. We have also maintained a remote offer for pregnant women. This meets some women's preference for working through our tailored antenatal education packs in their own time, along with phone or video-based support sessions.

Volunteers have played a key role in our community birth service and our mother and baby groups. This includes work 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 these services from a wide range of professionals, including midwives, social workers, children's centres and other voluntary sector organisations. Some women also self-refer to our community services after finding us online or hearing about us through their own networks.

Practical support

This year we provided practical support to **177** women and birthing people. This included taxis for travelling to or from hospital, phone credit, nursing bras and wellbeing packs, and supplying **44** baby boxes, containing everything a woman needs for her baby in the first two weeks after birth, through our sister charity [Pram Depot](#).

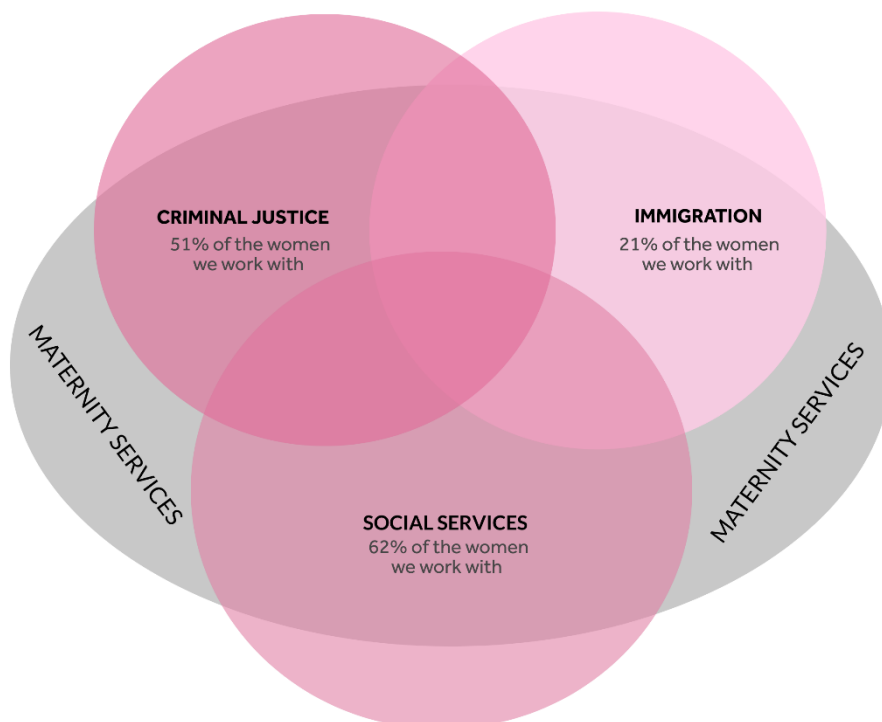
"This helped me so much, I am on a low income and would not have been able to purchase the items given to me by Pram Depot & Birth Companions."



Shaping services and systems to improve women's care

Work across our frontline services shows us what matters to women, and where things can and should be better in the care they receive from others. Based on these insights, we commission academic and peer-led research and direct the attention of local and national policy-makers, commissioners and service providers to what needs to change, and how.

We work with journalists to uncover injustice and practices that breach women's human rights, and we campaign to address these inequalities. The success of our policy and engagement work means Birth Companions' national profile and influence is substantial and growing.



Everyone at Birth Companions plays a role in this. Communication and collaboration between our frontline practitioners, policy and engagement staff and the women in our Lived Experience Team means we are able to identify and monitor issues and themes and draw on learning in order to feed them into conversations with senior stakeholders across maternity, criminal justice, social services and immigration. In this way we ensure our policy and influencing work is rooted in the day-to-day experiences of women and what will make most difference to them and their babies.



Policy and Engagement

Our Lived Experience Team has gone from strength to strength in the last year and is now made up of over 50 women with personal experience of disadvantage and inequality in pregnancy and early motherhood. Most of these women have been supported directly by Birth Companions in the past and are now committed to helping drive improvements for others in similar circumstances. In the last year members of this team and our policy and engagement staff have:

- Consulted with NHS Health and Justice professionals and co-designed health-focused service models for delivery in prison and probation services;
- Led a [high-profile campaign](#) to end the imprisonment of pregnant women, in partnership with our sisters at [Women in Prison](#) and [Level Up](#);
- Responded to two [Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigations](#) into the deaths of babies in the prison estate, working with stakeholders to ensure the learnings from these tragedies are addressed in new policy and translated into practice across the prisons system;
- Shaped [new guidelines](#) for maternity and social care professionals in new-born care proceedings;
- Co-designed the HOPE Box – a box to be used in the support of women separating from a baby at or shortly after birth;
- Contributed to a range of consultations, research and calls for evidence on issues relating to women's contact with the maternity, social services, criminal justice and immigration systems;
- Delivered training on trauma-inform practice for Maternity Voices Partnerships and academic researchers;
- Co-hosted [Mothers on Trial](#); a major national conference as part of an ongoing research collaboration on the links between the criminal and family justice systems.
- Published [This is what change looks like](#), a timeline charting Birth Companions' influence in the criminal justice system, to mark our 25th anniversary.



The impact of our work

It has been challenging to collect feedback from women this year, as it was in the previous year in the peak of the pandemic. As a result, evaluation data is based on feedback from 30 women.

87% felt our support had helped improve their mental health and well-being

96% felt we had helped them to feel less isolated

88% felt our support had helped them to give their babies a better start in life

Improving mental health and wellbeing

87% of the women who provided feedback felt our support had helped improve their mental health and wellbeing:

- Women told us that our support had helped them feel less worried during pregnancy (100%), birth (78%), and about becoming a mother (85%).
- They also said that it had helped them feel more positive about their situation during their pregnancy (100%), in preparing for their baby's birth (78%), and in terms of becoming a mother (85%).
- In addition, of the women who provided feedback on the support they received through our Community Births and Community Postnatal projects, 100% said our services had helped them feel more positive about their situations, and 87% felt less worried as a result.

"Useful information tailored to my needs."

"They really helped and supported me have the birth I wanted and I did it!"

"Very loving, comforting and supportive. I was so delighted with the love and care from Birth Companions."

Reducing isolation

96% of the women who provided feedback felt we had helped them to feel less isolated:

- 96% of women said they felt more supported and cared for.
- 88% of women said our support helped them to maintain their dignity and self-respect.
- 81% said our support had helped them to feel more confident about contacting other services.

"I feel less alone and more positive about the future."

"It made me feel like someone cared. Made me excited to meet my baby."

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

88% of women felt our support had helped them to give their babies a better start in life:

- 80% said we helped them know more about pregnancy.
- 100% of women said our services helped them feel more confident in making decisions for themselves and their babies.
- 88% said we helped them to understand more about looking after themselves and their babies.

"They helped me with making decisions about my birth, they talked to all the other people involved and helped give me confidence in myself. I felt understood, my mind at ease and listened to."

The quality of our services

We also asked women about their experiences of receiving our support. Feedback revealed high levels of satisfaction with the services. 97% were very satisfied with the support they had been given. Women said they particularly valued the way our services made them feel.

"I think Birth Companions is amazing, I can't fault a thing."



Tuesdae's Story

I discovered I was pregnant when I was remanded into prison. A lot of people might not be able to even imagine what it would be like being pregnant in prison. It's hard, you have no control over things. I was terrified about being able to get the medical help I needed while I was locked up.

Then a leaflet was left in my cell inviting me to meet with Birth Companions. I wasn't sure at first, I had a lot going on, there was so much uncertainty. But I decided to go to the group, and I'm just so glad I did. Birth Companions offered me antenatal classes, helped me create a birth plan, spoke to me about what I should expect and my rights. Ironically, I'm not a first time mum, but everything that I learnt in those classes I was hearing for the first time, which was amazing because it meant I could make informed choices.

The thing about Birth Companions was they always made me feel like a person. Never just a prisoner. I was always just me. They made me feel empowered and gave me advice that helped me have the birth that I wanted. Their staff and volunteers made me feel stronger when I felt weak and gave me power that I didn't think that I had, even at times when I was sad.

I stayed in touch with Birth Companions after I left prison. I joined the Lived Experience Team, so I could help improve the way the system works for other pregnant women and new mothers. And then there was an opportunity to join the charity as a trustee. At first I didn't actually know what a trustee was, so I spent some time reading about the role and the expectations, and then I applied and was accepted. Being a trustee has been so interesting, getting to see the inner workings of the charity. I take my hat off to the director and senior management because they are doing an amazing job.

When I found out that two babies had died in prison, in two separate incidents, I couldn't believe it. It was so shocking. So I joined Birth Companions' campaign to call for an end to the imprisonment of pregnant women. I was involved from day one, along with other women who'd been there too, and we worked together to create the campaign, agree the messages that would be used, and how we'd work with the media. We did an amazing job of raising awareness and getting the attention of government ministers, the public, women, families, to shift their ideas of what it means to be pregnant in prison, what the risks are, to try and make a change. I wouldn't want anyone to have the same experience as me.

I always say Birth Companions has its own fairy dust, they are almost like angels. They are so committed to change, and I feel privileged to be a part of it.



Brooklynn's Story

I was first supported by Birth Companions nine years ago, when I was facing separation from my little girl because of domestic violence and drug use. I'd already had five children removed from my care by the Local Authority. Then when I was having my daughter, I was speaking to the midwife at the hospital and I basically said I didn't want any support, I didn't want anyone with me. I didn't want anyone else to bond with her before she was taken away. Thankfully the midwife basically said 'look, I want to introduce you to Birth Companions.' And that was the beginning of our story, and it was amazing.

Birth Companions helped me write my birth plan, they supported me through my daughter's birth, they came with me to court for the care proceedings, while another of the team stayed with my newborn daughter in the hospital. They were there with me when she was taken away, and helped me get a breast pump so I could keep feeding her my breastmilk. It allows me to look back at that time with actual fondness rather than sadness.

*Birth Companions were the people who saw me for me.
They saw me as a mother who had lost my child.*

They always made sure I was ok, just checking in on the little things, like making sure that I had something to eat and reminding me that, you know, I needed to keep myself well, and just being on the phone sometimes just to have a vent or a cry.

That was a long time ago now, and life is very different. Having Birth Companions there for me, with no judgement, was really pivotal in helping me get on the path to sorting my life out and making changes. I had another little girl, who was taken away when she was three because I was in another violent relationship, and I was still using drugs, but I was still in contact with Birth Companions and I so I knew I could always come to them, that I had their support. I got myself free of drugs – three years ago now – and I got her back, and went on to have two more children, and Birth Companions were with me every step of the way. The three of them are all in my care now.

It's been a long road to get where I am, but Birth Companions has been instrumental in helping me get here. Now I'm part of the Lived Experience Team, so I have the opportunity to use what I've been through to help others, and to drive improvements in the services provided to women and mothers in similar situations to my own. It's about being able to give my truth, to have somewhere for it to go. And it's provided healing because even if nothing happens today, at some point, everything that I've done will help effect a bigger change.



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