



Celebrating 25 years of Supporting mothers, Empowering women

Impact report
1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021

"The work that the Birth Companions do is pioneering and vitally important."

Sheila Kitzinger, Honorary President 2001 - 2015

25 years of Birth Companions

After what has been a challenging year for so many of us, this is an appropriate moment to reflect, not just on what we have achieved this year, but since Birth Companions began 25 years ago.

Birth Companions was founded in 1996 following a campaign led by the renowned birth advocate Sheila Kitzinger to end the practice of pregnant women in prison being shackled during labour. As a result of this campaign, it became clear that many of the women giving birth from prison were doing so without support from family or friends. A group of local antenatal teachers and doulas came up with the idea to offer birth support to women in HMP Holloway and, encouraged by Sheila, the group calling themselves the Holloway Doula Group started their work.

In that first year we supported three women in custody at Holloway Prison during the birth of their babies. Over the years, we continued to grow until we became a registered charity in 2001 and officially became Birth Companions. We now support over 250 women every year in prisons across the country, and in the community in London and the South East.

When we started out, our focus was on working with women experiencing or at risk of detention. As our work beyond the criminal justice system developed, we saw first-hand how responding to women's experiences of multiple disadvantage, and working to improve the systems they encounter, hold the key to tackling health and social inequalities. This key understanding has shaped our policy and campaigning work, which you can read about below.

Although much has changed in the last 25 years, our ethos, approach and values remain the same: we work in a way that is woman centred, trauma-informed and non-judgemental. It's also a real testament to our values and commitment to the women we work with that two of the original members of the Holloway Doula Group still serve as trustees and that Denise Marshall, our very first member of staff, remains part of the team as Birth Companions' Head of Services.

When we look back at some of the earliest feedback we had from women and the feedback we received this year, it is clear to see that what women value most about what we do has not changed:

"It made you feel good and less left out. They made up for what I was missing, my family." - T.J. in 2001

"Birth Companions made me feel like I have a family, Birth Companions did everything a Mum would do." - A.W. in 2021

Today, as we continue to grow and develop, our approach to service delivery, engagement and policy and campaigning work remains the same: women are still and always will be at the heart of everything we do.

1996

Holloway Doula Group

In 1996 a campaign to end the shackling of pregnant women in custody during labour led to the creation of the Holloway Doula Group.



1996

1996 - 2000

The early years

1997

1998

1999

2000

- First meeting of Holloway Doula Group
- 6 active birth companions
- 3 births in first year
- Funding £0
- Women supported: 3 - 20 per year

2001

2001 - 2003

A registered charity

2002

2003



- Holloway Doula Group became Birth Companions
- Hand book written, training programme developed & website set up
- Coordinator and Administrator, 10 Birth Companions & 6 Trustees
- First funding £7.5K
- Women supported: 30 - 50 per year

2004

2004 - 2006

Developing our staff team and strategic development

2005

2006

- Denise Marshall becomes Group Coordinator, prison visitor and phone-holder roles created & first Strategic Plan written
- Work on Birth Charter started
- Constitution changed to include support for women in the community
- Funding £25K
- Women supported: 30 - 50 per year

2007

2007 - 2009

Community support

2008

2009

- Community Support, Training Support & Breastfeeding Officer roles created
- First Service Level Agreement with Holloway prison
- Research into needs of pregnant women in Yarl's Wood Detention Centre
- First external evaluation commissioned
- Funding £37K
- Women supported: 60 - 90 per year

2010

2010 - 2012

A new director, and the seeds of the LET

2011

2012

- Our first Director appointed
- Objectives changed to reflect our work with vulnerable women in the community
- First service user meeting
- Awarded the Una Padel Award for our work in Holloway Prison
- Funding £130K
- Women supported: 70 - 90 per year



2013

2013 - 2015 Expansion and the end of an era

2014

2015

- Holloway Prison's Mother and Baby Unit closes
- PramDepot launches with support from Birth Companions
- Services launched in Bronzefield prison, Peterborough prison and the community
- Evaluation of our community services by McPin Foundation
- Funding £165K
- Women supported: 100 - 120 per year

2016

Birth Charter



Our *Birth Charter for women in prison and England and Wales* is a set of recommendations for the care of pregnant women and new mothers in prison, coproduced with women with lived experience. The *Birth Charter* has led to a new prisons policy framework and international replication.

2016

2016 - 2018 Engagement and new services

2017

2018

- The *Birth Charter* launched
- Community Mother and Baby group starts
- National Lottery engagement programme begins
- Trauma-informed antenatal classes in the community start in Hackney
- HMPPS funds new projects in Foston Hall and Low Newton Prisons
- Research by UCLan into experiences and birth outcomes of vulnerable women; and peer research on women's experiences carried out with Revolving Doors
- Named the British Journal of Midwifery's Charity of the Year
- Funding £403K
- Women supported: 140 – 230 per year

2018

Lived Experience Team

The women we support are at the heart of everything we do and their voices are key to our work. Women with lived experience of multiple disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood play many key roles at Birth Companions including Peer Supporters, Trustees and a 40-strong Lived Experience Team.

2019

2019 - 2021 From strength to strength

2020

2021

- Conference at Oxford and roundtable events with Prisons Ministers
- Chair of Trustees and Head of Services are made MBEs
- Publish *Holding it all Together* with Birthrights
- Publish the *Birth Charter Toolkit* and the *Inside Guide*
- We adapt all our services in response to COVID-19
- We campaign for women to be released early & NHS England funds our support for women leaving prison across England during the pandemic
- CJA Awards 2020 – runner up for Outstanding National Charity
- Two women from the LET join our Trustee board
- Funding £490K - £530K
- Women supported: 258 - 260 per year





Our support and services during the COVID-19 pandemic

The last year has been difficult and overwhelming for everyone, but the women we work with have been more isolated, vulnerable and at risk than ever. Women in the community experienced huge challenges accessing basic necessities, health care and the support they need from statutory services. Prisons introduced extremely restricted regimes, meaning visits weren't possible, and women were confined in their cells for up to 23.5 hours a day.

The pandemic impacted significantly on the delivery of our frontline services. Visits and groups in both prisons and the community were suspended. During the first weeks and months we worked hard to adapt our services; despite the difficulties and challenges this presented, we are really proud of how much we have managed to achieve to ensure women were not left without support. As always, our volunteers and sessional workers have played a key role in helping us to continue delivering this vital support.

From 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021 we supported **97** women in **8** prisons in England and **88** women in the community in London:

- **56** women supported through Antenatal services
- **30** women supported through our Community Birth service
- **39** women supported through our Postnatal services
- **207** women were supported with practical items

Services in prisons

For women remaining in prison, our work has included supporting them via phone, email and letter; sending out information and resources; and supporting prison officers and families of those in custody. We were commissioned by NHS England to work with pregnant women and new mothers released from prisons during the pandemic. We set up a national phone line, and liaised with partners across the country to ensure that women had the specialist, holistic support they needed during this challenging time. This has provided a valuable opportunity to explore how we reach women in prisons where we don't have a face-to-face presence and over the year we supported women released from eight prisons across the country. We also started work on a new Peer Support program in Peterborough prison.

In November 2020 we were delighted to be announced Outstanding National Charity runner up in the Criminal Justice Alliance Awards. The judges said about Birth Companions:

"Pregnant women, new mothers and their babies are one of the most important groups in prison. The efforts of Birth Companions has ensured improved standards, increased investment and humanitarian intervention during the Coronavirus pandemic. It is a small charity with a big impact."

Services in the community

During the pandemic we reshaped our community services to continue to meet women's increased needs. As with our work in prisons, this included supporting women with multiple issues via phone, email and letter; providing them with information and resources; offering a greater range of practical support. We continued to offer limited birth support, and enhanced the support offered to women over the phone through our volunteer phoneholder team.

Practical support for women

In response to the lockdowns this year, we provided more women with more practical support than ever before. In partnership with [Pram Depot](#) we have provided 80 women with emergency baby boxes. These boxes contain everything women need for the first two weeks of their babies' lives and are designed to ensure that the contents are suitable for the woman receiving it, and appropriate for her needs and situation.

"I was unable to afford specific items for before and after my delivery, receiving them lifted my self-esteem and allowed me to focus on being a mummy."

Helping women stay connected with family and other organisations with phone top-ups was really important. We also wanted to ensure that women could travel safely to hospital appointments and during labour so we arranged black taxi services for these situations. We developed learning and wellbeing activity packs for women in prison and to support women with distance learning in place of our antenatal classes in the community. These have been very successful and we have been able to support 139 women using these resources.

"This has helped me throughout my time at HMP with the activity packs you sent."



Engagement

In 2011, Birth Companions held its first ever service user forum, at which women who had used our services in prison and post-release gave us honest and very useful feedback on their experiences. At that forum, many women told us that they would like to continue to be involved with Birth Companions and this sowed the seeds for what would later become our Lived Experience Team.

In 2016, with funding from the Big Lottery, we embarked on an ambitious program of engagement, training women with lived experience to become Peer Supporters at our groups, participate in peer-led research, and help to govern our organisation. This work led to the creation in 2018 of our Lived Experience Team (LET), a group of over 40 women with lived experience of multiple disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood, who contribute to the development of our services and to policy and co-production opportunities with a range of external agencies.

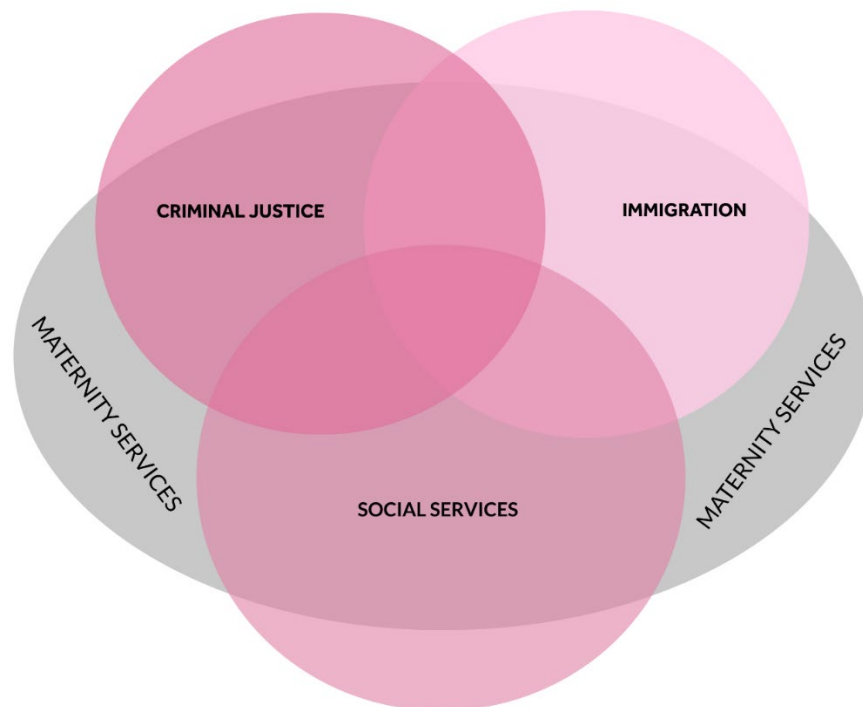
This year the team has been extremely active despite the constraints of the pandemic. Members of the LET are involved in a number of projects including a review of prison

MBU applications with the Chief Social Worker; development of a new national protocol for maternity and social care professionals with the University of Lancaster; and work with the team leading on the independent review of children's social care. We were also delighted this year to be able to welcome two new trustees recruited from the Lived Experience Team.



Policy and influencing work

Over the last 25 years we have worked tirelessly to influence policy and practice relating to the care of pregnant women and new mothers during their contact with the maternity and criminal justice systems, and increasingly in the social services and immigration systems too.



In the last 12 months, the COVID-19 pandemic has added a new dimension to this work, exposing the impact of health inequalities, isolation and digital exclusion to an even greater degree. Many consequences of the pandemic and its associated restrictions are only just starting to emerge, including the huge costs to mental health. There is a great deal of work to be done in helping services recover and rebuild in ways appropriate to women's complex needs. And yet there have been significant successes in the past year too.

Having led a [campaign](#) to secure the early release of pregnant women and mothers on Mother and Baby Units (MBUs) from prison at the start of the pandemic, we were pleased with the swift response of the Ministry of Justice in including these women in the compassionate release on temporary license scheme, although disappointed at the numbers who went on to be released overall.

We are delighted that, in our 25th year, we will be able to welcome the publication of the new Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service/Ministry of Justice (HMPPS/MoJ) Policy Framework on Pregnancy, Mother and Baby Units and Maternal Separation from Children Under Two in Prison. This set of mandatory requirements will be the first of its kind, and represents a major step forward in efforts to improve women's care and outcomes. Such a commitment to recognising and responding to the needs of pregnant women, mothers and their babies comes far later than it should have done, but to have got there in the end is nonetheless something to celebrate.

Birth Companions has played a central role in shaping the remit of this Framework, making sure it covers needs relating to miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirth and abortion as well as birth; and responds to the specific needs of women who are separated from their infants, as well as those who have their babies with them in MBUs. Having taken this vital step, the focus now needs to be on ensuring that the policy translates into practice in every women's prison.

But we must not stop at improving care inside prison walls. This year Birth Companions undertook research with Clinks on the experiences of pregnant women and new mothers serving community sentences, on bail, or under supervision following release from prison. The report – [A Window of Opportunity](#) – was published in May and shows just how much work needs to be done in these community CJS contexts. The timing of this work makes us well positioned to support positive developments through the new probation services about to roll out across the country. And work to reduce the number of women entering the prison system must continue and redouble.

As this latest work with Clinks shows, the intersections between criminal justice, maternity care and social services are significant and we've increased our policy and influencing work in this area in the last year. In 2020 we sat on the lay summary writing committee for the [MBRRACE report on maternal deaths](#) for the second year running, and were able to ensure the shocking statistics on the number of women who die while known to social services - 20% in the last two reports - featured prominently in this year's headlines. Looking ahead, we are excited about emerging projects in health, social care, immigration and the criminal justice system which will further our efforts to support mothers and empower women.



The impact of our work

It has been challenging for us to collect evaluation data this year; feedback comes from 23 women.

100% felt our support had helped improve their mental health and well-being

100% felt we had helped them to feel less isolated

100% felt our support had helped them to give their babies a better start in life

Improving mental health and wellbeing

100% of the women who provided feedback felt our support had helped improve their mental health and well-being.

"I always have Birth Companions at the end of the line for off-loading my worries or advice and care of my baby and myself. They ensured I was supported and valued at all times."

In particular, women told us that our support had helped them feel less worried during pregnancy (100%), birth (88%) and about becoming a mother (90%). They also said that it had helped them feel more positive about their situation during their pregnancy (91%), in preparing for their baby's birth (100%), and in terms of becoming a mother (89%).

"I liked every support I received, it helps me a lot as a first time mom to be."

"The knowledge was really good as all my worries and questions were answered and if they couldn't be answered info was found or directed to. Friendly and personable over the phone, none of that professional nose in the air conversation that made awkwardness over the phone, that you want to quickly come off the phone. The packs were so informative and lovely to read."

"The fact that they are there to help and support especially because being pregnant in prison is extremely hard."

"I am so grateful for everything you did for me and my baby, when I needed to decide and accept the C Section, my birth companion clearly explained for me and helped me make the right decision, I felt supported with this."

In addition, of the women who provided feedback on the support they received through our Community Births and Community Postnatal projects, 90% said our services had helped them feel more positive about their situations and 100% felt less worried as a result.

Reducing isolation

- 100% of the women who provided feedback felt we had helped them to feel less isolated.
- 100% of women said they felt more supported and cared for.
- 100% of women said our support helped them to maintain their dignity and self-respect.
- 89% said our support had helped them to feel more confident about contacting other services.

"The support was personal and I felt genuinely cared for."

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.
- 83% said we helped them know more about pregnancy.
- 89% said our support had helped them to know more about giving birth.
- 95% of women said our services helped them feel more confident in making decisions for themselves and their babies.
- 100% said we helped them to understand more about looking after themselves and their babies.

"Through my pregnancy journey, around the birth and afterwards they were always supportive, they are so caring and always help me with my needs."

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: 91% were very satisfied with the support they had been given. Women said they particularly valued the way our services made them feel.

"...the most understanding organisation with respect to pregnancy and post pregnancy. Very supportive, caring and helpful."



Sandra's Story

Sandra's story first appeared in our Annual Report 2005. It was the first time a woman's account of our support was published.

"I received a 2 year sentence last year. I was having a very bad time at this point in my life. I was with a violent partner, and I got into using drugs. I did not know I was pregnant until I was arrested on the charge. I was considered a persistent offender and ended up on remand for 4 and half months before I received the order. Things went well with the drug treatment order and I was clean of drugs after I got out of prison. Unfortunately I missed one of my appointments with the Probation Officer; I was taken back to court and was given a prison sentence. That day was awful; I had a gut feeling it was going to happen because of my past. But it was still really shocking, I was gutted and crying. I did not want to have my baby alone in prison.

I seriously considered an abortion at this point. I thought hard about it for two weeks and talked to the baby's father, he really wanted to have the baby and I began to think perhaps it would be possible and I could cope in prison. My main worry was what would happen to the baby if I couldn't keep it with me in prison. I have two other children who live with their father. This is the worst thing about being in prison, missing them so much, and they don't visit me because it would be too upsetting, though I talk to them all the time.

My Personal Officer suggested an application to the mother and baby wing. One of my Social Workers did not think this was a good idea and thought my baby should go into care after the birth, so I was originally turned down. I got a new Social Worker and they thought differently and supported me getting a place on the wing. I was really happy when I found out this was going to be possible and that I was going to be able to keep my baby with me.

I found out about Birth Companions in the Antenatal classes on the wing, I knew it was likely that I could be alone for the birth and I did not want this to happen. When I went into labour I was taken into hospital and a Birth Companions volunteer came in and brought nappies for me in preparation for the birth. I had a really difficult labour and was in hospital for a week. Time went by and I was getting really frustrated with the pain, but my Birth Companion was there reminding me how to breathe and helping me stay relaxed. I had acupuncture twice to try and help the labour along, but even this was stressful as I found it painful. I was really not prepared for how difficult this labour was getting as my other two pregnancies had been fine. My baby was induced in the end. I was really scared but my Birth Companion held me as they gave me an epidural and I was so relieved she was there. She also made me laugh and feel secure. I had always had a partner with me before. After my baby was born my Birth Companion took photographs, I wouldn't have had any otherwise. She also let my family know that the baby had been born.

Even though my labour was really difficult, it was great that I had a Birth Companion with me at the hospital. Birth Companions were really helpful and I really think that everyone should make sure they get one, especially if they have no family who can be with them when it's time to have the baby."



Kemi's Story

We first met Kemi when we supported her during her pregnancy with her daughter, and she attended our Community Mother and Baby Group for 2 years. She is now one of our Trustees.

I first heard about Birth Companions from another charity that was supporting me when I was pregnant with my daughter and I had so much help from them. At first they came to visit me at home. I didn't have any money for baby items so they provided me with the stuff I needed, they even gave me some maternity clothes for myself. They also helped to find someone to be with me when I was in labour, otherwise I would have been alone. After my little girl was born, I didn't really have much support in the community. Because I have some physical disability, it was hard to get around by public transport with a small baby, so Birth Companions arranged transport so I could go their Mother and Baby group. I loved going to the group because I got loads of support and my baby really enjoyed it too. The atmosphere was so welcoming, it was a place where I could go and relax and I felt looked after. I suffered from mental health issues and it was a place I felt safe to talk about how I was feeling, how I was coping. I met other women like me, and I didn't feel judged at all. We just had fun together; someone came and gave the mums a massage each week and the babies had other babies to play with. It felt like everyone who was there was equal, you couldn't tell who was staff and who wasn't. It was something I really looked forward to every week. I went there regularly for two years and when it was time for me to stop going, they didn't just leave me on my own; there was discussion about it all beforehand and they referred me to another group that I could go to with my daughter. A volunteer came with me the first time I went to the new group, so even that was done in a really supportive way.

I always knew that if I had the opportunity I wanted to do something to support the organisation because I believe so much in what they do, so when I found out that Birth Companions were looking for people to volunteer as peer supporters at the group I applied to do that and really enjoyed the experience. Last year I heard that Birth Companions was looking to recruit women with lived experience to join their trustee board, I applied for that too and after 6 months' probation I am now a full trustee.

When I first joined the board, I had a 'buddy' to support me, she was there to guide and support me with the role. I found it hard to read all the various papers before the meetings via email so now I get printed copies sent to me before every meeting so that I can be fully prepared and involved. I thoroughly enjoy being a trustee, there is no hierarchy or feeling that I don't have a right to be there - it feels like we are all equal.

To see myself going from using the service, to being a volunteer and now being a trustee, it feels amazing. I've found a confidence I didn't have before. I don't know where I would be without Birth Companions, they really picked me up when I was down – I wouldn't be here today without them, I know that for sure. When I didn't have a voice, Birth Companions gave me a voice.



Our Funders

We have received funding from the following sources:

AB Charitable Trust	Julia and Hans Rausing Trust
Bromley Trust	London Catalyst
CAF American Donors Fund	London Community Relief Fund
City and Hackney CCG	National Lottery Fund
Charles Hayward Foundation	NHS England
EQ Investors	North Central London Local Maternity System
Esmee Fairbairn	Northwick Trust
Evan Cornish Foundation	P & G Trust
Goldsmiths Charity	People's Health Trust
Henry Smith Charity	Pilgrim Trust
Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service	Rayne Foundation
Horner Smith Foundation	Social Care Institute for Excellence
IG investors	Smallwood Trust
Irwin Mitchell	Sodexo
Isabella Oliver	Sylvia Adams Foundation

Also a large number of generous individuals who supported our work through donations, and by taking part in fundraisings events.

We'd like to thank all our staff, volunteers, partners, friends and funders past and present for helping us grow and deliver these crucial services over the last 25 years.
