



# Impact Report 2019- 2020

# Monitoring report

## 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020

### Our work

Birth Companions is here to ensure every mother has the support she needs to give her baby the best possible start in life, whatever her circumstances.

We believe that no woman should go through pregnancy, birth and early motherhood on her own. That's why we offer practical and emotional support to pregnant women and new mothers experiencing disadvantage in prisons and in the community. Our non-judgemental, woman-centred and trauma-informed approach has been developed through 24 years' experience. It's hard to sum up everything we do but women often tell us we are like family.

We think much more could be done to improve care for women who experience the effects of multiple disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood. That's why we lead research and develop policy to drive positive change in systems and services.

### The need

The women we support face a range of difficulties 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 trauma and/or sexual abuse
- Immigration issues
- Poverty
- Isolation

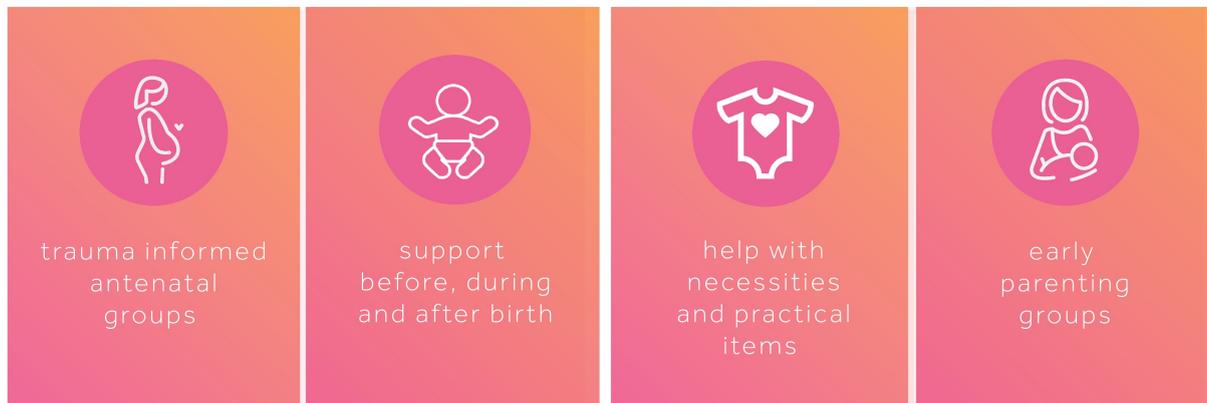
Many of those we work with experience several of these issues at the same time, making them particularly vulnerable. By engaging with them at this crucial stage in their lives, we have an opportunity to break long-standing and inter-generational cycles of disadvantage. We know the right support at the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

### An overview of our year

It has been a busy and productive year for Birth Companions. We supported more women and babies than ever before within our frontline services. Through our research, policy and communications activities, and our work with women in our Lived Experience Team, we have been able to exert considerable influence in the prison system and community services to improve the care given to women experiencing multiple disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood.



## The support we offered



From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020 we supported 166 women in four prisons in England and 93 women in the community in London:

- In prison we delivered 123 groups for pregnant women and 72 groups for new mothers, and offered one to one support where needed.
- 56 women attended community antenatal classes.
- We supported 16 women during the birth of their babies.
- 39 women attended our mother and baby group.
- 69 women received breastfeeding support.
- 78 women received essential practical items including items for their babies and maternity bras.
- We supported 22 women during separation from their babies.

In March 2020 we started to experience the full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our work in prisons and the community. The health risks posed by the pandemic and the restrictions put in place to mitigate its impact meant that we stopped almost all face to face services. There is more information below about how we have adapted our services, policy, communication and engagement work in the face of this challenge to ensure we continue to support the women who need us more than ever.

### Frontline work in prisons

Over the year we supported women in groups and through one-to-one and peer support programmes in four prisons in England: HMP Peterborough, HMP Bronzefield, HMP Foston Hall and HMP Low Newton. We were able to further develop our understanding of the needs of women who were separating from their babies; offer birth support to six women who would have otherwise been alone apart from prison officers; and support four women 'through the gate', helping them on the day of release with travel, accommodation and essential supplies, and continuing to support them for several weeks afterwards.

Our peer support schemes in prisons have gone from strength to strength. The work of the resident peer supporters has meant we have reached more women and that the nature and extent of the support has broadened and increased. Ex-resident peer supporters have participated in sessions at Bronzefield prison and this has proved a very valuable addition to our services, particularly for the women on the Mother and Baby Unit who are preparing for release and resettlement.

## Frontline work in the community

In the community we have been able to offer women a broader range of support during their perinatal journey. We continued to run antenatal courses in Hackney and Islington and have developed our referrals systems and resources. Over the year we have seen increasing numbers of women accessing the courses, and referral relationships have broadened and strengthened. Over the last year we have received referrals from midwives, social workers, children's centres and other voluntary sector organisations such as Bump Buddies and the Helen Bamber Foundation.

Since September 2019 we have worked with a smaller caseload of mothers at our community group in Islington, focusing on working with new mothers with babies up to eight months old.

Women who have accessed our support are also invited to join our Lived Experience Team, which contributes to the development of our services and to policy and coproduction opportunities with a range of external agencies. This is a growing area of work for us.

## Practical support for women

This year we gave practical support to 90 women, which included providing:

- Maternity bras for pregnant women and breastfeeding bras for new mothers
- Essential items for their babies such as Moses baskets, mattresses and bedding
- Newborn baby clothes
- Breast pumps and sterilisers
- High quality second-hand pushchairs and buggies through our sister organisation PramDepot
- Hospital bags for women's births
- Parenting books
- Groceries for new mothers at home with a newborn baby.

The practical needs of the women we support escalated significantly with the outbreak of Covid-19. More detail on our response to the pandemic and the changes made to our services is provided in a later section of this report.



## Research, policy and communications

We increased our research, policy and communications activity over the year, forging new partnerships and strengthening existing ones.

- In May 2019 we brought together a range of stakeholders, including a large group of women with lived experience, for a conference at Green Templeton College in Oxford focussed on extending the pathways for pregnant women and new mothers affected by the criminal justice system beyond custody. This provided a great deal of useful information and insight, and allowed us to develop crucial new relationships, including connections with NHS England's Liaison and Diversion services.
- We have organised two ministerial roundtable events with five women from our Lived Experience Team, in which they shared their experiences and expertise; one in June 2019 with the then prisons minister Edward Argar and Carolyn Harris MP; the second in March 2020 with the current minister Lucy Frazer.
- We published a major report with our partners at Birthrights in June 2019. [Holding it all Together](#) explores the extent to which the human rights of women experiencing multiple disadvantage are respected during pregnancy, birth and postnatal care.
- In July 2019 the Joint Committee on Human Rights published its report on the impact of imprisonment on mothers and their children. Birth Companions gave written and oral evidence to the committee in preparing for this report, and we were pleased to see

our concerns emphasised in [the final publication](#).

- We have worked with a number of expert panels and stakeholder groups to inform ongoing work relating to issues including maternal mortality rates (MBRRACE-UK), women experiencing separation from their babies after birth (the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and the National Midwifery Safeguarding Network) and the London Blueprint for a Whole System Approach to Women in Contact with the Criminal Justice System (with Advance).
- After the tragic death of a baby at HMP Bronzefield in September 2019, Birth Companions worked with parliamentary partners to ask questions about the incident and the wider risks; to call for better, more transparent gathering and communication of data, and to advocate for the development of a mandatory HMPPS framework for the care of perinatal women setting out rules for their care. We also worked with the All Party Parliamentary Group on women in the penal system to request that the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigate the deaths of all babies in custody; we expect this will be incorporated in their revised Terms of Reference in the coming year.
- In December 2019 we published [The Birth Charter Toolkit](#) a practical guide to the implementation of our Birth Charter. This was designed as a tool to assist prison and healthcare services at national and local levels, particularly informing the development and delivery of the new NHS England Health & Justice perinatal pathway and the forthcoming HMPPS framework for pregnant women and new mothers.

### The nature of multiple disadvantage in the women we support

During the year we collected information about the issues experienced by 150 of the women we supported.



## The impact of Covid-19 on our organisation and services

We have worked very hard to adapt our prison and community services in response to Covid-19. In prison this includes supporting women via phone, email and letter, sending out information and resources, and supporting prison officers and families of those in custody. We have recently been commissioned by NHS England to provide support to pregnant women and new mothers being released early from prison due to Covid-19. We have set up a dedicated national phone line, and are liaising with partners across the country to ensure that women have the specialist, holistic support they need during this challenging time.

We have also reshaped our community services to continue to meet the increased needs of the women on our current caseloads and to support new referrals. As with our work in prisons, this includes supporting women with multiple issues via phone, email and letter; providing them with information and resources; offering a greater number of practical items; and paying for phone top-ups and taxi services to hospital for labour. As birth partners are increasingly limited, we have developed a phone birth support offer through our volunteers.

In response to these unprecedented times we have turned the attention of our policy, communications and engagement work towards the impact of Covid-19 on maternity services, the prison system, and the experiences of the women we are supporting.

From the start of the Covid-19 outbreak we campaigned for the priority release of pregnant women and those in prison Mother and Baby Units, and for the holistic support of those who are released in light of the challenges they might experience in the community, especially in accessing specialist maternity services. Since the government announced plans to allow such releases where women were deemed eligible, we have been working closely with HMPPS, the Ministry of Justice, and a range of partners across the voluntary sector to ensure these women get the services and support they need to successfully resettle in the community. This is an evolving situation, and we will be sharing regular updates on our website and social media channels.

We are gathering information about the experiences of women facing multiple disadvantage in the community and feeding it through to stakeholders at a local and national level. For example, we have submitted evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee and developed an information sheet for midwives working with vulnerable women during Covid-19.



### The impact of our work

Evaluation data collected from 93 women this year shows the powerful difference our support can make at such a crucial time in people's lives.

**92%** felt our support had helped improve their mental health and well-being

**88%** felt we had helped them to feel less isolated

**92%** felt our support had helped them to give their babies a better start in life

## Improving mental health and wellbeing

92% of the women felt our support had helped improve their mental health and well-being.

In particular, women told us that our support had helped them feel less worried during pregnancy (97%), birth (86%) and about becoming a mother (91%).

*"I don't think I would have got through this without all their support."*

They also said that it had helped them feel more positive about their situation during their pregnancy (94%), in preparing for their baby's birth (92%) and in terms of becoming a mother (92%).

*"For the birth they were with me all the time, I was never alone."*

*"I felt looked after and listened to. So much kindness."*

In addition, of the women who provided feedback on the support they received through our Community Link and Community Group projects 100% said our services had helped them feel more positive about their situations and 86% felt less worried as a result.

*"I came here terrified and clueless of pregnancy and my options with the baby labour, and being a first time mum, absolutely everything! Now I feel a lot more at ease!"*

## Reducing isolation

- 88% of the women who provided feedback felt we had helped them to feel less isolated.
- 91% of women who attended our groups both in prison and the community said our services had helped them get more support from other women.
- 81% said our support had helped them to feel more confident about contacting other services.
- 100% of the women supported in the community said our services helped inform them about other sources of support.

*"Birth Companions made me feel like I have a family. I lost my Mum three years ago and when I was pregnant I was very worried what to do without her but Birth Companions did everything a Mum would do, really I am very grateful."*

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

- 92% 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.
- 96% said our support had helped them to know more about giving birth.
- 94% of women said our services helped them feel more confident in making decisions for themselves and their babies.
- 91% said we helped them to understand more about looking after themselves and their babies.

*"I'm really happy to have attended your course. It's had a great positive impact on my life even just stepping out of the house to attend your class has given me the confidence."*

*"With Birth Companions I felt like being myself, to ask questions and learn without feeling overwhelmed."*

*"The support from Birth Companions has helped me a lot as a first time mum. My daughter had some medical problems for a few months after she was born and coming to the group helped me forget all about that and enjoy my time with her. I'm still breastfeeding and my baby is almost 1!"*

## 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.

*"I received all the support and love from this group and I'm more positive and prepared to meet my little man now! I love everything about Birth Companions. Birth Companions is amazing!!"*

*"I'm just sad that they are a small charity and other women can't get support from the service."*

*"The dedication from all the birth companions is outstanding. I am truly grateful."*



### Amy's Story\*

Amy was referred to us when she was 32 weeks pregnant. She was homeless and living in a hostel, having been moved by social services after experiencing domestic violence. She has very poor mental health and finds it hard to trust people and build relationships.

During the last few months of her pregnancy our Community Link Coordinator, Helen was able to meet with Amy several times. Amy had a lot of anxieties about labour but also about becoming a mum. She had not attended any antenatal classes and so we were able to support her with resources and information to help her prepare for the baby's birth.

As part of the support we referred Amy to our partner organisation PramDepot, who provided her with a bespoke package of high quality recycled baby items. We also bought her a moses basket with a new mattress, bedding and baby clothes. Our team helped Amy organise a bag of items to take with her to hospital and accompanied her to one of her hospital appointments. We also gave her some money to ensure she could pay for a minicab when she went into labour.

When Amy went into labour she called our 24-hour birthline and one of our volunteers arranged to go and support her. Our volunteer Sarah\* helped Amy to stay calm using breathing techniques and lots of reassurance. The labour progressed quickly and she said afterwards that although the birth was very painful, it was her best achievement to date.

Amy stayed in hospital for a few days after the birth and our volunteers continued to visit her. She was also receiving support from the hospital perinatal mental health team and we worked closely with them to ensure Amy was getting enough help and support with bonding with her new baby. We arranged for one of our specialist breastfeeding supporters to spend some time with Amy to help her get feeding established. We also measured her and bought her properly fitting nursing bra.

Our contact with Amy continued after she went home. When her baby was two months old she said she was keen to attend our community mum and baby group. We arranged for one of our volunteers to meet her near her home and accompany her to the group. Amy really enjoyed the session and meeting other mums. She told us she found it really helpful having someone come with her the first time, and felt more confident about coming again on her own.

The Covid-19 situation has meant that we are not currently running our face to face groups, so our team is now supporting Amy with regular phone calls. We have also been able to send her some essential items she couldn't find during the early weeks of lockdown, such as baby wipes and nappies, and have sent her some books on child development. We have also

advised Amy on accessing supermarket opening hours for vulnerable people.

*\*Names have been changed*

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Amy's story, and the feedback from all those who have taken part in our service evaluations this year, demonstrate the complexity of individual women's situations, and the impact that compassionate, flexible, woman-centred care can have during such key moments in their lives.

We'd like to thank all our staff, volunteers, partners, friends and funders for helping us deliver these crucial services to so many in 2019-20. We look forward to doing more; particularly helping women navigate the considerable challenges arising now and in the months to come as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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## Our Funders

We have received funding from the following sources:

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Henry Smith Foundation  
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Horner Smith Foundation  
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Mishcon De Reya  
National Lottery Fund  
North Central London Local Maternity System  
Northwick Trust  
Irwin Mitchell  
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People's Health Trust  
Pilgrim Trust  
Rayne Foundation  
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Sodexo  
Trust for London

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