



Impact Report 2018–19

Introducing our work

At Birth Companions 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 women before, during and after their baby's birth in prisons across England and in the community in London. 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 pregnant women and new mothers who experience multiple disadvantages in their lives. That's why we lead research and develop policy to make services better during this crucial time.

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

The need

The women we work with face a range of difficulties which can often make the birth of their baby a time of anxiety, stress and hardship.

These can include

- mental health issues
- vulnerable housing and homelessness
- substance misuse
- involvement with the criminal justice system
- contact with social services
- experience of domestic violence
- a history of trauma or sexual abuse
- immigration issues
- significant financial difficulties

We work with mothers who experience several of these issues at the same time, making them particularly vulnerable at this important point in their lives. The right support can make a huge difference to the outcomes of these mothers and their babies, but their needs are often misunderstood or overlooked by service providers and policy makers.

The opportunity

Working with women during their pregnancies, births and beyond presents a tremendous opportunity to break long-standing cycles of disadvantage. Our non-judgemental, woman-centred and trauma-informed approach has been developed through over 20 years' experience working with pregnant women and new mothers facing severe and multiple disadvantage in prison and in the community.

We aim to

- improve the physical and emotional wellbeing of pregnant women and new mothers experiencing multiple disadvantage

- enable new mothers to give their babies the best possible start in life
- shape local and national policy and practice that impacts on mothers and their babies.

An overview of our year

This has been an exciting year for Birth Companions. As well as continuing our work in HMP Peterborough and HMP Bronzefield we began supporting women in HMP Foston Hall and HMP Low Newton. We are now training serving prisoners and women who have been released from prison as peer supporters so perinatal women in custody are able to access support between our visits. In 2017 we piloted targeted antenatal classes in Hackney. Based on the success of that pilot, we have continued to run these sessions and have now begun offer these classes to women in Islington.

The women we support are at the heart of everything we do and their voices are key to our work. In 2018 we created our Lived Experience Team with funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. The women in this team – all of whom have lived experience of multiple disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood – have been instrumental in helping to build awareness and understanding, and inform change at national, regional and local levels. By working with journalists to deliver impactful media coverage of the issues, and by taking part in consultations, research, service evaluations, high-level meetings and conferences, they have helped service providers, commissioners and policymakers understand better the needs of women whose voices are rarely heard. In the last year our Lived Experience Team has worked with organisations including Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, NHS England, Women's Mental Health Network, Public Health England and Revolving Doors Agency.

In October 2018 Birth Companions and Revolving Doors Agency published new research [*Making Better Births a reality for women with multiple disadvantages.*](#) The project was led by a team of peer researchers (women with lived experience of multiple disadvantage who have trained as researchers) and co-designed with local commissioners. The resulting report shares the voices and experiences of 34 women in north-east London – voices of a kind rarely heard by mainstream services – mapped against the priorities set out in the National Maternity Review.

We have also been working on a joint research project with Birthrights, exploring the human rights aspects of severe disadvantage during the perinatal period, and look forward to launching the findings of this work in June 2019.

The support we provided

During 2018-19 we provided women with a range of practical and emotional support during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood for as much as two years after the birth of a woman's child.

Prison groups

Regular pregnancy and early parenting groups in HMP Bronzefield, HMP Peterborough, HMP Foston Hall and HMP Low Newton

Community Classes

Specialist antenatal classes for women whose circumstances might make it difficult for them to attend classes at their local hospital or in the community

Community Support

One-to-one support to women in the community in London during pregnancy, throughout labour and birth and after their babies have been born.

Community Group

A weekly group providing space for mums and babies to come together and support each other in a relaxed and friendly way.

Help with practical items and necessities

We work with an organisation called [PramDepot](#) to provide women with a full range of maternity and baby items so they are prepared when their baby arrives.



The women we supported

During 2018 – 19 we supported 258 women:

- 123 women were supported in prison
- 27 women were supported one to one in the community
- 50 women attended our community group
- 35 women attended our antenatal classes the community
- 46 women received breastfeeding support
- 76 women were provided with practical items including items for their babies and maternity bras

During the year we collected information about the issues experienced by 109 of the women we supported.

■ Lone Parent	52%
■ Social Services Involvement	44%
■ Mental Health	39%
■ Housing Issues	35%
■ Financial problems	30%
■ Substance Misuse	28%
■ Perinatal Depression	26%
■ Domestic Abuse	23%
■ Uncertain immigration status	14%
■ Estranged from Family	13%
■ Language Issues	11%
■ Time Spent in Care	8%
■ Trafficked to UK	7%



The women we work with face multiple disadvantages.

All the women we collected information from were dealing with at least three issues; 38% reported at least five issues and 13% of women reported ten or more issues.

The impact of our work

Improving mental health and wellbeing

- 98% of the women who provided feedback felt our support had helped improve their mental health and wellbeing.
- 98% who provided feedback felt our support had helped them feel better supported and cared for.
- 93% who provided feedback felt our support had helped them to maintain their dignity and self-respect.

In particular, women who provided feedback told us that our support had helped them feel less worried during pregnancy (98%), birth (90%) and about becoming a mother (90%).

"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 (98%), in preparing for their baby's birth (96%) and in terms of becoming a mother (90%).

"Birth Companions made me feel comfortable caring for and delivering my baby."

"I am prepared to have the baby, as before the support I was completely insecure and now I feel stronger mentally and able to care for my baby with more confidence."

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

"A safe place to talk and learn."

Reducing isolation

97% of the women who provided feedback felt we had helped them to feel less isolated.

- 96% of women who attended our groups both in prison and the community said our services had helped them get more support from other women.
- 84% said our support had helped them to feel more confident about contacting other services
- 92% of the women supported in the community said our services helped inform them about other sources of support

"I love the fact that we can all relate and talk about our worries as first time mums."

"The support and information given but also the time which was given to everyone to express their feelings and fears."

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

98% of women who provided feedback felt our support had helped them to give their babies a better start in life.

- 90% said we helped them know more about pregnancy
- 92% said our support had helped them to know more about giving birth
- 93% of women said our services helped them feel more confident in making decisions for themselves and their babies
- 93% of women said we helped them to better understand more about looking after themselves and their babies

"I massively appreciated getting help and support from all the women. Anything they could do to help they did. They even looked things up for us and brought things in. Nothing was too much. They made me feel confident to ask for birthing preferences even though I am a prisoner I still mattered which was great for me."

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

Many women also said our support had helped them to breastfeed their babies:

- 82% said it had helped them feel more positive about breastfeeding
- 78% said it had helped them feel more confident about breastfeeding
- 82% said we had helped them know more about breastfeeding.
- 71% said our support had helped them breastfeed for longer.

"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 we provide; 99% were very satisfied with the support they had received. Women said they particularly valued the way our support 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."