



Birth Companions

Impact report

2016 - 2017

1. Introduction

Birth Companions aims to improve the well-being of pregnant women and new mothers in prison and of those who are facing severe disadvantage in the community. We seek to do this by:

- improving their mental health and well-being
- reducing their isolation
- enabling them to give their babies the best possible start in life
- improving their conditions.

The support we provided

During 2016-17, we provided a range of practical and emotional support during pregnancy, birth and for up to six months after the birth of a woman's child. This included:

- pregnancy and early parenting groups in prison and the community
- intensive one-to-one visits at home from staff and specialist volunteers
- a full range of high-quality recycled pregnancy and baby items
- support during birth
- postnatal visits both in hospital and in a woman's home
- specialist breastfeeding support.

The women we supported

During 2016 – 17, we supported 164 women:

- 116 women were supported in prison
- 16 women were supported in hospital
- 27 women were supported one to one in the community
- 30 women were supported in a group in the community
- 68 women received breastfeeding support



During the year we collected information on the issues experienced by the women we supported through our Community Link project. From the 26 women who provided this information, we found that:

- 23 women (88%) were single parents
- 17 women (65%) had housing issues
- 16 women (61%) had social services involvement
- 15 women (58%) had financial difficulties
- 11 women (42%) had experienced domestic abuse
- 8 women (31%) had mental health issues
- 8 women (31%) were becoming a mother for the first time
- 6 women (23%) had no recourse to public funds
- 6 women (23%) showed signs of perinatal anxiety/depression
- 5 women (19%) were on medication
- 4 women (15%) had experienced sexual violence
- 4 women (15%) were estranged from their family
- 4 women (15%) had safeguarding issues
- 4 women (15%) had language issues/needed an interpreter
- 3 women (11%) had been in care
- 2 women (7%) had substance misuse issues
- 2 women (7%) were HIV+
- 1 woman (4%) had a history of human rights violation
- 1 woman (4%) had previously lost a child

Moreover, women tended to have multiple issues; over half (61%) of these women reported between at least five issues and over a quarter of the women (27%) reported at least ten issues.

Evaluation

Birth Companions is committed to getting feedback from the women we support in order to ensure that our services are meeting their needs and are effective in making a difference in their lives. We have designed an evaluation framework which identifies the outcomes that we hope to achieve through our work.

Getting feedback from women can be challenging as their situations are constantly changing, making it difficult to plan appropriate points at which to ask them to provide



feedback. Some women engage with us throughout the perinatal period whilst others only come into contact with us for a short period of time. In addition, some women have literacy issues or do not speak English as their first language. Others may leave the prison or be moved to another area before we have a chance to ask them to complete a feedback form.

We therefore aim to keep our evaluation activities both sensitive to their situations and as light-touch as possible.

This year's data is therefore based on feedback from 61 women, which represents just over a third (37%) of the 164 women we supported during the year. This was comprised of:

- 35 forms completed by women who received antenatal support from us in prison.
- 21 forms completed by women who received postnatal support from us in prison.
- 8 forms completed by women who were supported by our Community Link service.

2. Findings

2.1 Improving mental health and well-being

97% of the women we supported felt we had helped improve their mental health and well-being (n = 61):¹

- 95% felt our support had helped them to cope emotionally with their situation (n = 61)
- 95% felt our support had helped them feel better supported and cared for (n = 61)
- 93% felt our support had helped them to maintain their dignity and self-respect (n = 61).

“As I was alone during pregnancy and birth they provided me with untold amounts of emotional support and kept me sane. They have listened to me vent and have supported me through tears and very hard times. I cannot thank you all enough.”

“I had no family or friends by my side during pregnancy and birth but I wasn't alone as Birth Companions became my family.”

In particular, women told us that our support had helped feel less worried during pregnancy (86%, n = 35), and about becoming a mother (83%, n = 35).

¹ n = the number of questionnaires completed where women answered this particular question.



They also said that it had helped them feel more positive about their situation during their pregnancy (88%, n = 35), in preparing for their baby's birth (77%, n = 35) and in becoming a mother (88%, n =35).

"All my questions and worries were answered. The ladies who run the group are so supportive and never make me feel I am being judged or my decisions are wrong."

In addition, eight of the nine women who received support from us in the community said this had helped them cope better with their situation.

"Birth Companions were the only people who made me feel supported.....The support I received made an enormous difference to me."

"I don't think I would have coped or managed without them."

2.2 Reducing isolation

93% of the women we supported felt we had helped them become less isolated (n = 61):

- 77% said our support had helped them get more support from other women in prison (n = 53)

"Without Birth Companions my pregnancy in prison would have been a lonely, worrying experience."

- 79% of the women supported in the community said our support had helped them access other services (n = 29)
- 75% said our support had helped them maintain contact with their family and friends during the time of their baby's birth (n =8).

In addition, 87% said they would like to join a similar group after they were released from prison (n = 53).



“(I really valued) being around pregnant people and learning new skills for being a good parent.”

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

98% of women were able to give their babies a better start in life as a result of our support (n = 61):

- 91% said our support had helped them to know more about pregnancy, birth and motherhood (n =35)
- 92% said it had helped them feel more confident in making decisions about their pregnancy, birth and motherhood (n =61)
- 86% of women said our support helped them to better understand and meet their baby’s needs (n =29).

“I’ve been a mum for 19 years but we always learned new things and Birth Companions helped me a lot.”

“This was my first pregnancy and I have no idea about anything. Coming along to this group has helped me gain knowledge.”

“Birth Companions have made me feel more confident about my pregnancy and giving birth. I have found the group really helpful friendly and supportive”

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

- 79% said it had helped them feel more positive about breastfeeding (n = 61)
- 69% said it had helped them feel more confident about breastfeeding (n =29)
- 59% said it had helped them know more about breastfeeding (n =29)
- 55% said it had helped them breastfeed for longer (n = 29).

“They also helped a lot with breastfeeding.”

“Support and advice on breastfeeding when I first arrived.”

“They got me nursing bras which was a massive help and I’m so grateful.”



2.3 The quality of our services

We also asked women about their experiences of receiving our support. Feedback from women revealed high levels of satisfaction with the services we provide; 97% were very or quite satisfied with the support they had received (n = 61). Women said they particularly valued the feeling of support they gained from being in touch with us; one woman said our support *“gave me the confidence to look after my baby and know that I can do anything.”* Several women also commented on the way we provide our services with *“compassion and warmth”* and *“kindness and humanity.”*

Only a few women made any suggestions for improving our services:

“Peer support from prisoners that have experienced pregnancy in prison could be positive to women entering prison in the same situation.”

“More physical actively like yoga.”

“More about twins.”

The vast majority of women were both extremely grateful and appreciative of the support we had provided them.



Appendix 1: Evaluation data

Issues faced by women (n = 26)	No.	%
Single parent	23	88%
Housing issues	17	65%
Social services involvement	16	61%
Financial difficulties	15	58%
Experience of domestic abuse	11	42%
Mental health issues	8	31%
First time mother	8	31%
Perinatal anxiety/depression	6	23%
No recourse to public funds	6	23%
On medication	5	19%
Estranged from family	4	15%
Experience of sexual violence	4	15%
Safeguarding issues	4	15%
Language issues/needs interpreter	4	15%
History of being in care	3	11%
Substance misuse	2	7%
HIV+	2	7%
Human rights violation	1	4%
Previous loss of child (either through death or permanent removal)	1	4%
Learning difficulty	0	0%
Sex worker	0	0%
Physical disability	0	0%



Outcomes	Yes	No.	% Yes
Improved mental well-being (<i>one or more positive responses to the following indicators</i>)	59	61	97%
More able to cope emotionally	58	61	95%
More supported and cared for	58	61	95%
Greater dignity and self-respect	57	61	93%
Less worried during pregnancy	30	35	86%
less worried preparing for birth	27	35	77%
Less worried about becoming a mother	29	35	83%
More positive during their pregnancy	31	35	88%
More positive about becoming a mother	31	35	88%
More able to cope	7	8	87%
Reduced isolation (<i>one or more positive responses to the following indicators</i>)	57	61	93%
More support from other women in prison	41	53	77%
More able to access other services	23	29	79%
Maintain contact with their family and friends	6	8	75%
Join a similar group	46	53	87%
More able to give their baby a better start in life (<i>one or more positive responses to the following indicators</i>)	60	61	98%
Know more about pregnancy, birth and motherhood	32	35	91%
More confident in making decisions about their pregnancy, birth and motherhood	56	61	92%
Better able to understand and meet their baby's needs	25	29	86%
Feel more positive about breastfeeding	48	61	79%
Feel more confident about breastfeeding	20	29	69%
Know more about breastfeeding	17	29	59%
Breastfeed for longer	16	29	55%