



Impact report

1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023



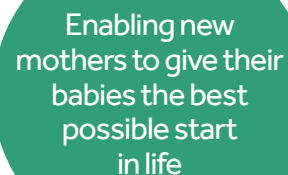
What we do

In the UK, a growing number of pregnant women, mothers and their babies face severe disadvantage and inequality. Birth Companions is here to call attention to these issues; provide support to mothers and children; and improve the care they receive.


We aim to make the lives of mothers and babies better by:



Improving the mental health and wellbeing of pregnant women and mothers of infants



Enabling new mothers to give their babies the best possible start in life



Empowering women to grow their confidence and skills 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 period 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. We also work to improve those circumstances by driving policy and practice; and campaigning to achieve greater social and reproductive justice.

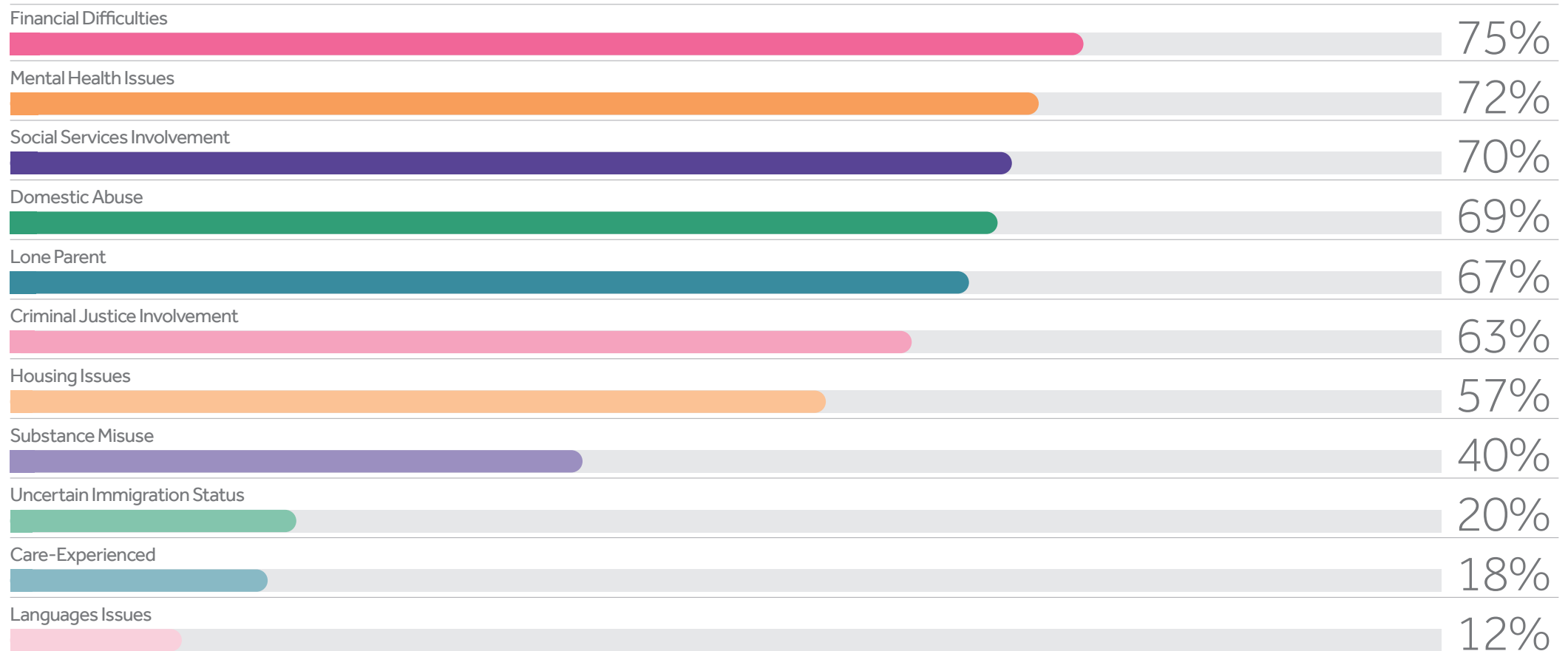
Engaging with women during pregnancy and early motherhood gives an opportunity to break long-standing and intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. We know the right support at the right time can make a huge difference to outcomes for mothers and their babies, but their needs are often misunderstood or overlooked by service providers and policy makers.

Birth Companions' approach is built on three pillars: our frontline services; engagement with our 50-strong Lived Experience Team; and our policy and influencing function. By drawing together insight and action across all three, we are uniquely positioned to deliver, understand, inform, and shape work that makes a real difference to women and their babies amidst complexity, disadvantage and inequality.

We have used the words 'woman' and 'mother' throughout this report, but we recognise that not everyone who is pregnant or has recently given birth identifies as a woman or mother. Our services are for anyone who is pregnant or has recently given birth, whatever their gender identity or how they express their gender.

Why Birth Companions is needed

The women we work with face a range of intersecting challenges during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood which means they experience severe disadvantage and inequality.



Why Birth Companions is needed

Experiencing multiple challenges at the same time can compound and amplify women's needs and the associated risks to their health; and add to the risk that their pregnancy and the birth of their baby will be a time of anxiety, stress and hardship.

70% of the women we support have involvement from children's social care

The number of babies and infants subject to care proceedings is growing¹, while outcomes for mothers with social care involvement are getting worse.

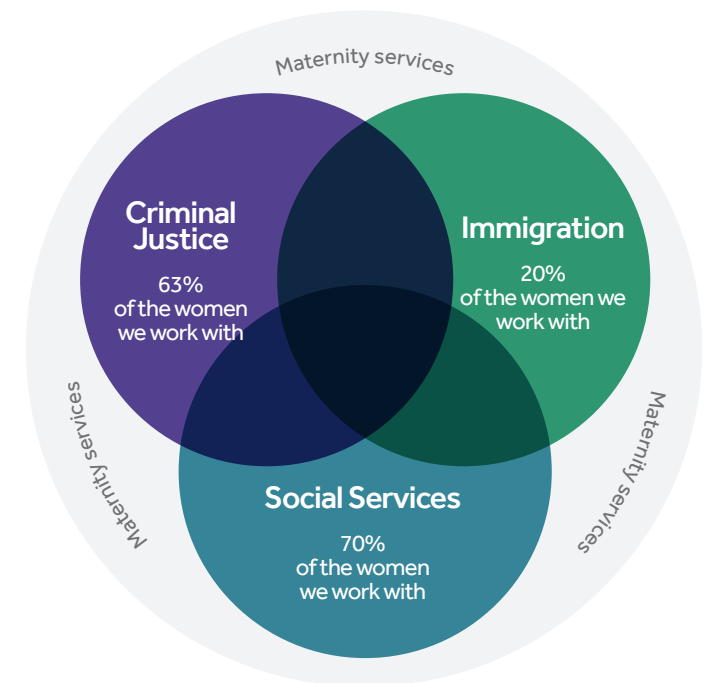
The health of many mothers in these situations is poor, and their treatment is often unfair. In MBRRACE-UK's latest maternal mortality report², 20% of the women who died in pregnancy, birth or the year after birth were known to social services, up from 12% in 2012-14 and 17% in 2017-19. 11% of those who died by suicide and 59% of those who died through substance misuse had had an infant removed into care and/or ongoing care proceedings.

63% of the women we support are caught up in the criminal justice system

Around 50 women give birth during time in prison in England each year³. An unknown number of pregnant women are held in custody, and many mothers are separated from their babies by imprisonment. The NHS categorises every pregnancy in prison as high risk because of the nature of the environment. Research shows high levels of missed midwifery and obstetric appointments, increased rates of premature birth, low birth weight, stillbirth and neonatal unit admissions among women in custody compared to those in the community⁴. Two babies died in their mother's prison cells in recent years.

20% of the women we support have contact with the immigration system

Women with insecure immigration status face the threat of huge charges for accessing maternity care and experience poor quality and unsafe housing; frequent relocation at short notice; and extreme social isolation. They are the subject of hostile environment policies, including the government's new 'Illegal' Migration Act.



1 Broadhurst, K., Alrouh, B. et al. (2018) Born into Care: Newborns in care proceedings in England, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

2 MBRRACE-UK (2022) Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care - Lessons learned to inform maternity care from the UK and Ireland. Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths and Morbidity 2018-20, Oxford: National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit.

3 Ministry of Justice (2022) HMPPS Annual Digest 2021/22

4 Nuffield Trust (2022) Inequality on the inside <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/inequality-on-the-inside-using-hospital-data-to-understand-the-key-health-care-issues-for-women-in-prison>

Why Birth Companions is needed

The cost of living is soaring, and the picture is bleak for mothers and children at the highest risk of mental and physical ill-health due to their socioeconomic circumstances. Black babies living in deprived areas are twice as likely to be stillborn than white babies from the least deprived areas⁵. Mothers who are Black or Asian, those who are living in deprived areas, and those experiencing multiple disadvantages are more likely to die in pregnancy, labour, or the year after birth⁶.

Cuts in public services impact disproportionately on women facing disadvantage and inequality⁷. Reeling from 13 years of austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic, maternity staffing levels pose “unacceptably high levels of risk”⁸; health visitor numbers have fallen by at least 30% since 2015⁹ and continue to fall; mental health services are overwhelmed; and family support services have given way to a steep rise in late stage, crisis-level interventions from the children’s social care system¹⁰. Mothers and their families who experience disadvantage and inequality are at greater risk from the increasing threat and growing harms of the climate emergency^{11,12}. Calling attention to the way in which these factors impact on women’s lives and outcomes for them and their children, and campaigning to achieve social and reproductive justice for them, is a fundamental part of Birth Companions’ approach.



5 MBRRACE-UK (2022) Saving Lives, Improving Mothers’ Care <https://www.birthcompanions.org.uk/resources/mbrance-uk-saving-lives-improving-mothers-care-2022>

6 As above

7 Agenda Alliance/Changing Lives (2023) Dismantling Disadvantage. <https://www.agendaalliance.org/news/new-report-reveals-shocking-rise-in-unnecessary-deaths-for-women-in-the-north-east/>

8 APPGs on Baby Loss and Maternity (2022) Safe Staffing: The impact of staffing shortages in maternity and neonatal care [https://sands.org.uk/sites/default/files/Staffing%20shortages%20-%20APPG%20report,%20Oct%202022%20\(final\).pdf](https://sands.org.uk/sites/default/files/Staffing%20shortages%20-%20APPG%20report,%20Oct%202022%20(final).pdf)

9 First 1001 Days Movement (2022) Why Health Visitors Matter: Perspectives on a widely valued service <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Why-Health-Visitors-Matter.pdf>

10 Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2021) Newborn Babies in urgent care proceedings in England and Wales <https://www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/newborn-babies-urgent-care-proceedings>

11 Global Black Maternal Health (2023) Black Child Clean Air <https://drive.google.com/file/d/19Pyw3Ck5V7QPufyDy9CA2QMmmalWAxyE/view>

12 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/15/global-heating-linked-early-birth-damage-babies-health>

Our values

Birth Companions was founded in 1996 to support pregnant women and new mothers in the harsh environment of Holloway Prison. Over the 27 years since, we've become experts in working with women who experience pregnancy and early motherhood in the most difficult and disadvantaged circumstances. Birth Companions' values have shaped the organisation's approach from the outset and are more important to us than ever.

● **Birth Companions is a women's organisation built on feminist principles, delivering woman-to-woman support.**

Choice, empowerment and protecting women's rights are central to the way we work. Experiences of trauma have shaped the lives of most of the women we support, and our trauma-informed way of working responds to the particular impact of trauma during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood.

● **Birth Companions is an anti-racist organisation.**

We are committed to being an inclusive, diverse, culturally competent and anti-racist organisation that acknowledges and takes action against structural, institutional and interpersonal racism. We recognise this needs to be rooted in action within our organisation and in our external activities.

● **Birth Companions is a sustainable organisation.**

We recognise we have a collective duty to act now to mitigate the impact of the climate and nature emergency on future generations. Our environmental policy sets out Birth Companions' practical response to the climate emergency through making choices that mean the charity has less impact on the environment. We act as a leader in our field by sharing information, policy and best practice in this area, and by encouraging other organisations to act with us.

● **We are on a journey.**

We will continue to learn and improve our practice to ensure these values are borne out through Birth Companions' work.

Birth Companions' commitment to reproductive justice

Reproductive justice is a rights-based framework and an intersectional feminist activist movement bringing together reproductive rights and social justice. It centres on four core human rights:

- 1 The right to maintain personal bodily autonomy
- 2 The right to have children
- 3 The right to not have children
- 4 The right to parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities

The reproductive justice framework speaks to our core values at Birth Companions. Our work to improve the lives and outcomes of pregnant women, mothers and infants facing inequality and disadvantage is underpinned by the belief that interconnected systems of oppression negatively impact women's reproductive lives and experiences of motherhood. We see how racism, poverty, housing and food insecurity, health inequalities, hostile immigration policies, and the climate emergency all intersect to undermine women's health and wellbeing, with the greatest impact felt by the most marginalised communities.

Birth Companions hopes to draw on, learn from, and contribute to the work of the reproductive justice movement by centring the voices of some of the most marginalised women in our society, and challenging the oppressive systems and narratives that shape their lives. We aim for our engagement with the reproductive justice framework to be respectful, collaborative and productive, and would welcome being allies to, and collaborators with, other organisations leading in this space.

Our frontline services in 2022/23



From 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 we supported:

128

women and birthing people in prisons in England

63

women were supported through our Peer Support services in prisons

101

women and birthing people in the community in London and the South East

23

women through our Community Criminal Justice Perinatal Support service

19

women through our Community Birth service

39

women through our Community Postnatal services

45

women through our Community Antenatal services

We supported **71** women during separation from their baby both in prison and the community; almost twice the number supported last year.

This year we provided practical support to **118** women. This included taxis for travelling to or from hospital, phone credit, nursing bras and wellbeing packs, and supplying **34** baby boxes, containing everything a woman needs for her baby in the first two weeks after birth, through our partner charity Pram Depot.

In 2022/23 we provided support to women and one birthing person in HMP Bronzefield, HMP Foston Hall and HMP Peterborough through peer support, one-to-one and group-based services. We have also been working to help develop services for women in HMP Drake Hall.

Our frontline services in 2022/23



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 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, including care for women experiencing miscarriage and those accessing abortion services.

Our probation-linked service, run through a partnership with Advance, has continued to grow, offering support to pregnant women and mothers of infants at risk of CJS involvement; after release from prison; and serving community sentences across London and the South East.

We have been able to restart our specialist antenatal classes and mother and baby groups in the community in London while maintaining the remote offer for women developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This meets some women's preference for working through our tailored antenatal education packs in their own time, along with phone support sessions.

Volunteers play a key role in the delivery of our community birth service and mother and baby groups in London. 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 refer themselves to our community services after finding us online or hearing about us through their own networks.



The impact of our services



Improving mental health and wellbeing

100%

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 (87%), during birth (100%), and about becoming a mother (82%).
- 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 (100%).
- In addition, of the women who provided feedback on the support they received through our Community Births and Community Postnatal projects, 86% said our services had helped them feel more positive about their situations, and 95% felt less worried.
- 90% of women said our support helped them to maintain a sense of their dignity and self-respect.

/// I was really stressed and panicking about the birth when I thought I was going to be alone, but having the birth companions there made it the calmest, most positive birth I've had. ///

/// I started my pregnancy feeling very alone and anxious if I could handle it, but truly Birth Companions helped me so much. I really appreciated the hand written cards and gifts all along the way, and the advice I got in antenatal classes made me more clear and confident about my birth choices. The companionships to a couple of late pregnancy appointments was very reassuring and when luckily my family could make it into the country for the birth, having transport arranged and giving them your number to call and get more advice and support when I was in labour and dealing with complications was really helpful as well. I am just so grateful I had this extra layer of support. It made a big difference in my experience... ///



Reducing isolation

95%

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

97%

of women said they felt more supported and cared for

88%

said our support had helped them to feel more confident about contacting other services

“ My birth companions were amazing. I felt really relaxed and not alone in labour. It was a really good experience. Also really nice to have someone there for encouragement, and for things like helping get me a drink or get the baby dressed when she was born and I couldn't get up. It felt the same as having someone I knew there in terms of feeling safe and supported. ”

“ It was great opportunity to have a couple of hours a week where someone else held my baby. It was a lovely space next to nature and I felt welcomed, non-judgemental and to have a mental break for a few moments. The resources they had available, free knitted baby items, massage for the mum, baby massage and the sling workshop was highly beneficial as well as a free lunch and return transport fare. It definitely feels like you are cared for and they do a lot for you, even as small as making a cup of tea and getting to drink it when it's warm. ”

“ I valued the camaraderie of women who are mothers and had challenges of their own when they were expecting and had a baby. I was not supported by my family and the father of the baby was in and out. I felt like I had someone there for me and that I was not alone. This made me less scared. The human and practical guidance I received was like that of a mother/sister. It made a huge difference in reducing my stress levels and I felt like there is a safety net and a community of women in this organisation who care about me and my baby. ”

“ One of the things I valued the most was talking to the Birth Companions staff. I had antenatal classes and also I attended a class for baby massage, talking to the staff always made feel welcomed and supported. They provided me with information relevant to my situation and they were always happy to answer my endless questions... ”

The impact of our services



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

100%

said we helped them know more about pregnancy

77%

of women said our services helped them feel more confident in making decisions for themselves and their babies

72%

said we helped them to understand more about looking after themselves and their babies

“ I did not have the financial resources to buy many things except the absolute essentials. The baby box contained a range of clothing, breast pump, steriliser and other bits which would have cost me a fortune. I felt so heartened and relieved to have these essentials before the birth. ”

“ I received a baby box with baby items and it made feel that someone else (not only me) was celebrating my baby’s arrival, it made me so happy and feeling that I was not alone! ”

“ Reassurance and motivation that my body is made for pregnancy, labour and birth, along with the confidence to know it will cope with looking after my new baby. ”

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. 92% were very satisfied with the support they had been given. Women said they particularly valued the way our services made them feel.

“ I will never forget the extensive and invaluable help, support, guidance and above all the genuine care which I received. Birth Companions is a unique and special organisation! ”

Driving change



Work across our frontline services shows us what matters to women, the challenges they are facing, and where things can and should be done differently. Based on these insights, we commission and partner in 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 and legal experts to uncover injustice and practices that breach women's human rights, and we campaign to address these inequalities.

Our Lived Experience Team plays a central role in all this work. The Team now includes 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 2022/23 we have pursued several major workstreams to drive change across the criminal justice, social care and immigration systems. These include:

Our continued campaign to end the imprisonment of pregnant women and mothers of infants, which has led to a commitment from the Sentencing Council to look at pregnancy as a separate mitigating factor in sentencing guidelines.

Working with stakeholders across the system, including HMPPS, NHS Health & Justice, the Care Quality Commission and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman to maintain scrutiny and highlight concerns about perinatal women and their babies in prison.

Advising on the Chief Social Worker for England's review of prison Mother and Baby Unit applications, which uncovered significant concerns about the application processes and a recommendation for urgent reform.

Supporting the development of Born Into Care best practice guidelines for professionals working with women when the state intervenes at birth.

Building evidence and calling for improvements across health, social care and the family justice system for women who have involvement from children's social care, through work with the national maternal mortality enquiry; the DHSC and NHS Health and Wellbeing Alliance; and the development of our new Birth Charter (details below).



Working with University of Lancaster's Centre for Child and Family Justice on the Giving HOPE project, an intervention to help support women who are separated from their baby close to birth due to safeguarding concerns.

Co-designing a new 'navigator' service to support women at risk of or experiencing infant removal at birth in Hackney, with a Lived Experience Team advisory group and 40 local stakeholders.

Supporting Lost Mothers, a co-design ERSC-funded research project with University of Hertfordshire examining the compulsory separation of mothers and babies in the criminal justice system.

Work with the Women's Environmental Network and other stakeholders to develop a paper on Reproductive Justice and the Climate Emergency which will be included in the Feminist Green New Deal project.

Highlighting the acute needs of pregnant women and mothers of infants with insecure migration status, including campaigning successfully with our partners to preserve the 72-hour limit on detention threatened by the government's 'Illegal' Migration Bill.



The Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care

Developing the Birth Charter has been a major focus for our policy and engagement team since the start of 2022. Launched in July 2023, the Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care has been created to help bring greater attention to the needs of women who are almost entirely overlooked in national policy and guidance in the health, social care and family justice systems.

Tens of thousands of women have contact with the children's social care system during pregnancy and early motherhood each year in England. Some have an initial assessment and get early help from social workers. Some move into processes such as pre-proceedings or court proceedings. Thousands of mothers have their baby removed from their care by the family courts. Government reports show 5,410 infants under the age of one began being 'looked after' by the State in 2022¹⁴.

Since 1996 Birth Companions has supported hundreds of women in these circumstances. Some of those mothers have contributed to the Birth Charter, which also draws on the expertise of practitioners, commissioners, academics and many others working across health, social care, family law, the criminal justice system and beyond.

The Birth Charter sets out how services and systems in England should support all women involved with children's social care from conception to their child's second birthday. Fourteen principles are outlined to inform and shape policy, commissioning, and professional practice, and to support advocacy. In the Birth Charter, we call for a national health and social care pathway for pregnant women and mothers of infants who are subject to pre-birth or parenting assessment, or child protection proceedings.



Anna

A Lived Experience Team Member

/// I am a member of the Lived Experience Team with Birth Companions and I have been involved with the development of the new Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care since the beginning. My hope is that this helps mould and shape changes in social care to help build a national pathway that enables woman to get the support they need and turn social care involvement into a positive rather than a negative.

I am honoured to have taken part with other amazing women and shared our experiences and traumas. I am very proud of what we have all input and been able to achieve in helping shape this Birth Charter and see it right through to the end which brings us here today.

Thank you to everyone at Birth Companions for listening to our voices and helping us be heard. To make a change you need to be a part of the change. ///



GSK King's Fund Impact award

In 2023 we were thrilled to win a prestigious GSK King's Fund award, national recognition of our impact on improving the health and wellbeing of the women we support. The judges said:

/// Birth Companions does exemplary work in prisons and the community to support some of the most vulnerable pregnant women in our society, helping them to give their babies the best possible start in life. Through their impressive 50-strong Lived Experience Team, they put women's voices at the heart of everything they do and use their frontline insight to influence at the highest levels. Despite its small size, the charity has achieved incredible impact working at the challenging intersection of maternity services with criminal justice, the NHS, social services and the immigration system. Through exceptionally strong partnership working it has been a catalyst for change in the reform of maternity services for women in the criminal justice system. ///

GSK
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TheKingsFund>

**2023 GSK
IMPACT Awards
Winner**

Thank you to our funders

AB Charitable Trust
Adrian Swire Charitable Trust
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Bromley Trust
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Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
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And thank you to the large number of generous individuals who supported our work through donations and by taking part in fundraising events.