



Dear friends,

Welcome to the Autumn edition of our newsletter. It has been busy here at Birth Companions, with lots of news to share. Read on for updates on our services, a fundraising campaign, our new impact report, our response to recent maternal mortality figures, and an important Sentencing Council consultation.

With love,
Birth Companions

News

Big Give Challenge 2023

Birth Companions is taking part in the **Big Give Women and Girls Match Fund challenge** this year. As part of this challenge, all donations made to us up to £10,000 are doubled by match funders - and we are delighted to say that we have already reached our target! An enormous thank you to everyone who has so generously donated so far.

While donations will no longer be doubled, our Big Give fundraising page remains open until midday today, Wednesday 18th October. If you're able, then please consider using this as your chance to support our work; however small, your donation will go a long way to ensuring we can continue to support women facing some of the most challenging circumstances during pregnancy and early motherhood.

[Donate to Birth Companions' Big Give Challenge](#)

Sentencing Council

In response to research that Birth Companions contributed to in 2021, the **Sentencing Council is running a consultation** on changes to the guidelines used by magistrates and Crown Courts when passing a sentence. In this consultation, the Council has included a **draft 'mitigating factor' relating to pregnancy and the postnatal period**. This is an important move, given the severity of the risks prison poses to the health and wellbeing of pregnant and postnatal women and their

babies.

As specialists in this area, we are **preparing a detailed response to the consultation**, which includes several important changes to the draft mitigating factor. We are also **preparing a briefing to help support other organisations and individuals in developing their own consultation responses**. [Please contact us if you would like to receive a copy of this briefing.](#)

Our impact

Last month, we published our [Impact Report for the 2022-23 financial year](#). Over that period, we supported **128** women and birthing people in prisons in England, and **101** women and birthing people in the community in London and the South East. We supported **71** women during separation from their baby both in prison and the community; almost **double** the number supported last year. When we asked women we worked with about our support:

- **100%** felt our support had helped improve their mental health and wellbeing
- **95%** felt we had helped them to feel less isolated
- **88%** said our support had helped them to feel more confident about contacting other services

"I started my pregnancy feeling very alone and anxious if I could handle it, but truly Birth Companions helped me so much... The advice I got in antenatal classes made me more clear and confident about my birth choices, and the companionships to a couple of late pregnancy appointments was very reassuring... I am just so grateful I had this extra layer of support. It made a big difference in my experience."

[Read Birth Companions' Impact Report 2022-23](#)

Services

So far in 2023, we have worked with more than 20 women through our Community Births service, including supporting 10 women during labour. Many of our newly trained birth companions have now supported several women, and it's wonderful to see them settling into their new volunteer roles.

Our Community Antenatal Class and Mum and Baby Group both restarted in September, after a break over the summer holidays. Last week we had one of our largest Mum and Baby Group sessions since the first Covid lockdown - it was really special to be able to bring so many mums and babies together! Last month we also started a new training programme for Community Postnatal volunteers, who will begin supporting women from January onwards.

"I value the camaraderie of women who are mothers and had challenges of their own when they were expecting and had a baby. I felt like I had someone there for me and that I was not alone. This made me less scared."

Our Perinatal Support Service for women involved with the criminal justice system in the community continues to go from strength to strength, supporting a large caseload of perinatal women across London and the South East. Our coordinator for this service has been providing incredible one to one support, as well as significant and intensive advocacy work for many women at risk of, or experiencing separation from their babies.

"I love speaking to Birth Companions. I don't feel judged, and I really enjoy our conversations - I find them so useful."

We have been working to develop a new perinatal pathway and train peer supporters in an additional prison, while our coordinators and peer supporters continue to provide invaluable support for pregnant women, women on Mother and Baby Units and those separated from their babies through our existing Prison Services. We are also supporting a number of women experiencing termination and baby loss. While the prison system continues to struggle with staff shortages and overcrowding, we are maintaining our essential advocacy role, working to ensure women are able to access the care and support they need.

Policy and Engagement

MBRRACE-UK Maternal Mortality report

Last week, the latest **MBRRACE-UK report into maternal mortality** was published. Birth Companions is pleased to be part of the stakeholder group for the annual MBRRACE reports, and to have the opportunity to ensure ongoing attention to inequalities in maternal death rates rooted in deprivation and disadvantage. This year's report found that stark inequalities in maternal deaths have continued to widen, putting the Government on track to miss its own target to reduce maternal mortality by 50% by 2025. Women living in the most deprived areas are now more than twice as likely to die during pregnancy and in the year after birth as women in the most affluent parts of the country; and for the fourth consecutive year, there has been a continued rise in the number of women who are in contact with social care services when they die - taking the total up to 21%. The fact that these trends have continued to worsen is, in itself, deeply concerning. But we also know that this year's report is based on data from before the cost of living crisis, meaning next year's figures are likely be considerably worse again.

We are pleased that the **Birth Companions Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care** was cited in this year's MBRRACE-UK report, in light of calls for improved multi-disciplinary collaboration and postnatal care for women at risk of separation from their baby. But so much more must be done to improve

outcomes for pregnant women and mothers of infants experiencing disadvantage and inequality. Naomi Delap, Birth Companions' Director, has commented:

"We need a radical shift to make sure all services... are able to work proactively and flexibly to meet every woman's needs, no matter how complex, before, during and after pregnancy. And we need real leadership from across government to address the social determinants of health, making sure every woman is supported to have a healthy and positive experience of pregnancy and early motherhood."

[Read Birth Companions' full response to the MBRRACE report](#)

HOPE Boxes

All the way back in 2019, members of the Birth Companions Lived Experience Team joined an advisory board that went on to develop 'HOPE Boxes' - beautiful and thoughtfully packed pairs of boxes to be given to mothers and babies who are being separated soon after birth by children's social care. This summer, on a very sunny but windy day, a group of those birth mothers - now known as 'HOPE mums' - met to launch the HOPE Boxes in Lancashire, the first part of the country in which all hospitals will be trialling the boxes. A hugely supportive and productive team of university staff and health professionals attended a packing event at Lancaster University, with HOPE mums monitoring quality control to make sure every box was perfectly packed. Thanks to everyone's hard work, a total of 150 pairs of boxes were packed for the local hospitals.

*The **Giving HOPE project** is a collaboration between Birth Companions and the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University.*

In case you missed it...

Watch... ***With Woman***, a Guardian documentary following a Black midwife who supports Black women to give birth at home, in the US state of Illinois where midwives are unable to obtain licenses to practice.

Listen... ***Perinatal Mental Health Podcast Miniseries***, from Transformation Partners in Health and Care (TPHC), focusses on different areas of perinatal mental health from the perspective of specialist midwives, healthcare professionals, lived experience practitioners, women and birthing people, and partners.

*If you'd like more information on anything mentioned in this newsletter,
please **get in touch***
