



## **Birth Companions submission to the Women and Equalities Committee's inquiry into the impact of the rising cost of living on women**

November 2023

### **Birth Companions**

Birth Companions is a charity dedicated to tackling inequality and disadvantage during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood, and to ensuring all mothers can give their babies the best start in life. We work to support pregnant women and mothers of infants in the community in London and the South East, and in prisons across England. The women and babies we support are affected by the criminal justice, children's social care, and immigration systems; and they face some of the most challenging circumstances, including homelessness, trafficking, poverty, mental ill-health, racism, and domestic violence.

#### **Birth Companions' approach is built on three pillars:**

1. Our **frontline services**, supporting women in a trauma-informed way through pregnancy, childbirth and the postnatal period, in the community in London and the South East, and in prisons across England;
2. Engagement with our 50-strong **Lived Experience Team**, many of whom have been supported by Birth Companions' services in the past, who contribute their insight and expertise to internal and external research, commissioning, policy, and service design work;
3. Our **policy and influencing** function, which draws together insight and action from our services and engagement work. This uniquely positions us to deliver, understand, inform, and shape policy and practice, at both the local and national levels, making a tangible difference to women and their babies.

### **An issue of reproductive justice**

The cost of living is soaring, and at Birth Companions we see a picture that is bleak for mothers and babies facing complexity, disadvantage and inequality.

Earlier this year, Birth Companions wrote<sup>1</sup> that the cost of living crisis must be seen as a reproductive justice issue, impacting women's fundamental rights to have children; to not have children; and to parent their children in safe and healthy environments.<sup>2</sup> We highlighted several examples of reproductive injustice resulting from the cost of living crisis, noting that rising food, energy and housing costs impact poorer women most severely, and disproportionately undermine their opportunities to raise their children in safe and healthy environments.

In October 2023, we decided to explore women's experiences of the cost of living crisis further, by speaking to members of our Lived Experience Team, pregnant women and new mothers being supported through our community services, and our frontline service coordinators who provide informational, signposting and advocacy support to women facing some of the most challenging

<sup>1</sup> Delap, N. & Kitchen, K. (2023). Why the cost of living crisis is a reproductive justice matter. *BMJ*, 380: 118. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p118>

<sup>2</sup> SisterSong. (2023). Reproductive Justice. <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>

circumstances in prisons and in the community. To gather this insight, we hosted in-person discussion sessions, hosted an online survey, and reviewed recent support records and reports.

In what follows, we centre the voices of women – and the staff supporting them – in order to paint a picture of the complex and distressing impacts this cost of living crisis is having on women already navigating significant disadvantage and inequality.

### **Food and energy bills**

All of the women we heard from, across both our current services and our Lived Experience Team, identified the rising costs of food and energy as key concerns for themselves and their families:

*"I'm only able to afford two meals a day."*

*"I'm budgeting meal costs but I'm still finding it difficult to spend less on food, as I'm already only getting the essentials."*

*"I had to get food bank vouchers for more food, as the money I do have has been paying bills and gas and electric. I haven't been even able to buy my children's clothes because there's nothing left to do so."*

*"I'm unable to heat water for baths or heating up the house when it gets cold."*

*"I need support with energy bills the most, but there's just no point reaching out for support for energy bills. For food or baby items, you can go to food banks or baby banks, but there is nothing like that for energy."*

*"I'm concerned about being able to afford rent, and if universal credit will be enough to help me to meet all the bills that need to go out."*

*"I reached out for help to the water bill company – they were very helpful and reduced my monthly payment, which really helped. So then I called the energy company to do the same, I filled out all their forms for financial support, but then they said I am not eligible and they cannot do anything. I don't understand why I was eligible for support from the water company, but not the energy company. I don't understand what their criteria are."*

*"I'm considering buying a little electric heater because it is so expensive to heat my whole place with the gas. At least with a heater I could heat one room for me and my baby, and it might be cheaper."*

When we spoke to our staff members about what they had been noticing among the women they support, we heard:

*"Some women I support have reported they can't feed themselves so they feed their children and skip meals."*

*"The cost of baby formula is a big issue for women I support who are unable or choosing not to breastfeed. Recent data showed that average prices have risen 24% over the past two years. The cheapest brand of formula milk has risen by 45%."*

### **Health and wellbeing**

Many women commented on the impacts that the rising costs of living are having on their physical and mental health and wellbeing:

*"I don't sleep when I think about energy bills. I'm already not sleeping much because I have a new baby, but then the stress keeps me up too."*

*"I am constantly checking online to check the bills, and my bank account. Sometimes we run out of money two weeks before getting paid."*

*"This crisis has affected my mental wellbeing and physical health."*

*"I am breastfeeding, but I'm not getting enough nutritious food myself to breastfeed well. As an asylum seeker, the money I receive each week for food is not enough to eat well. I am having stomach problems because I am only eating bread and non-nutritious food."*

*"With these prices our children's futures are being destroyed."*

Similarly, our staff members told us:

*"Rising costs are causing a lot of stress and anxiety for the postnatal women I support."*

*"Women I support are exhibiting stress that is on top of the complex needs they have already. This is contributing to more trauma, and stress around their basic needs being met and them providing for basic necessities for their children."*

### **Employment and childcare**

Many of the women we heard from wished to return to work when their babies were old enough, or to take on additional work. But for many of them, this was not straightforward due to prohibitive and rising costs:

*"I might not be able to go back to work after maternity leave, as the cost of childcare is too expensive. I would love to go back to work, get out the house, have something to occupy my mind, but I just might not be able to afford it."*

*"A bit more assistance with childcare would help, so I could pick up more hours at work."*

*"As a single mum I'm finding it increasingly difficult to stop worrying about keeping a home and making ends meet. Fuel for car, fuel for the home, the ongoing bills that need to be paid. Internet costs to try and apply for working from home jobs."*

*"As a mum who works part time I struggle, and continue to worry about ensuring everything is paid."*

### **Transportation**

Essential transportation costs related to their children came up as an additional concern for some women we spoke to, impeding their access to services and adding further strain on their finances:

*"I can't afford to take my child to the children's centre due to the cost of transportation."*

*"We used to walk to my son's school, but the council moved us to temporary accommodation in a different borough, so now I have to get the bus which costs more money."*

### **Support needed**

Our highly experienced staff members talked about the fact that it is increasingly difficult to find sources of practical support for women:

*"I'm finding baby banks are often closed for referrals due to demand, and others slow to respond due to not having the stock. One baby bank told me they are not getting as many donations - possibly because people are selling more rather than donating."*

They also shared ideas on additional forms of support that would make a meaningful difference:

*"The women I support need more access to household grants to cover the needs of their children like clothes and food."*

*"Perhaps a price cap on baby formula or making it available for free for women on low incomes would be a good idea. I know Healthy Start can be used to pay for this, but women need more support."*

*"Women I support on a prison Mother and Baby Unit have not been getting appropriate food for themselves or their babies, and purchasing food on the MBU is even more expensive than shops in the community. But women on MBUs are not able to access foodbanks or Healthy Start – they should be eligible for Healthy Start vouchers."*

*"Women need benefits payments or wages to keep in line with the rise in cost of living."*

The women we heard from also felt strongly that much more needs to be done at a national, governmental level to support pregnant women and mothers struggling under the rising cost of living:

*"There should be more help for families who can't afford the basic needs of living especially children having to live on two meals a day. The NHS Healthy Start card should be the same amount from birth up to 5 years old for children."*

*"The Government should try to control the prices in the UK and also give more helping hand to those who are working, because they suffer the most, that is why most of them are depressed. How can someone wake up very early or stay up throughout the night yet there is nothing to show for it? People who are working should also be entitled to some form of help."*

*"The Government needs to start paying for their mistakes. It's not our fault that other countries are going through wars and conflict. Why should the people who don't have much already, suffer because of that?"*

### **In summary**

Through our conversations with women being supported by Birth Companions' services, and those who are members of our Lived Experience Team, it was clear that the rising cost of living is having significant, disproportionate and specific impacts on women facing pregnancy and early motherhood in already complex, disadvantaged and unequal circumstances.

At Birth Companions, we believe that commitment, compassion, and strong leadership from government are required to ensure the needs of pregnant women and mothers of infants facing inequality and disadvantage can be met; that their rights are properly upheld; and that they are supported to give their babies the best start in life. The women we work with were already overburdened and under-supported. The current cost of living crisis is adding new, intolerable layers of difficulty to their lives.

Too much onus is placed upon individuals – and the strained public and voluntary sectors supporting them – to find ways to cope with economic conditions entirely outside of their control. Many girls and women are burdened with adversity, trauma, and racism throughout their lives. We need to radically change our systems to recognise, mitigate, and directly tackle these inequities.

Birth Companions would welcome the opportunity to work together with the Women and Equalities Committee to further explore the experiences of women facing inequality and disadvantage, in order to ensure pregnant women, mothers of infants, and babies living in the most challenging circumstances are given the very best support to navigate this cost of living crisis.

*To find out more about Birth Companions' work, or to discuss working together on any of the issues explored in this submission, please contact Katherine Miller Brunton ([katherine@birthcompanions.org.uk](mailto:katherine@birthcompanions.org.uk)).*