



October 2021

Dear friends,

We hope you are well and enjoying the start of Autumn. It's been an incredibly busy few months for us at Birth Companions, with changes to the staff team, the launch of a new probation support service, the resumption of more in-person services, and the release of the long-awaited Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's report into the devastating death of Baby A in HMP Bronzefield in 2019.

If you would like any further information on our work, or would like to discuss ways to support us or work in partnership, please do [get in touch](#).

Thanks as always for your support.

Prisons and Probation Ombudsman report and campaign launch

As many of you will have seen over the past few weeks, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) has now published her [long-awaited and devastating report](#) on the death of Baby A in Bronzefield prison in 2019. This is a deeply tragic case and our thoughts are with the mother – referred to in the report as Ms A – and those around her. This must never happen again.

The Ombudsman's report has added to the considerable evidence showing that prisons are not safe for pregnant women and their babies. It has made clear that every pregnancy in prison is a high risk pregnancy, because women are kept behind a locked door for a significant amount of time. Prisons are unable to provide the personalised, trauma-informed care pregnant women require to address their complex health and social care needs. [Read our full response to the PPO's report](#).

In response to the report [Birth Companions launched a new campaign](#), in partnership with [Level Up](#) and [Women in Prison](#), to end the imprisonment of pregnant women. Our [campaign film](#) is available to watch and share online now and coverage in the media has been extensive, including a feature on [BBC 2 Newsnight](#) and articles in [Grazia](#), [iNews](#) and [Stylist](#) among others (please do bear in mind you may find some of the experiences shared in this coverage upsetting).

Our [campaign petition already has over 7,400 signatures](#), and we'd encourage you all to sign and to share far and wide, if you haven't yet done so.

The campaign will continue in the coming weeks as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill enters the next stage of its progression through parliament (the committee stage). Amendments to the Bill have been tabled by the Joint Committee on Human Rights, including changes that would see a requirement to avoid the imprisonment of pregnant people or primary carers of dependent children wherever possible. These have been developed with input from [Women in Prison](#) and Birth Companions.

For more information on any of this work please contact [Kirsty](#).

Environment statement

"There are inextricable links between climate change and economic inequality, racism, and the restriction of reproductive rights. We therefore view efforts to address climate change and reverse the destruction of the natural world as an essential part of our work to achieve systemic change for women facing disadvantage and inequality."

We're really pleased to have recently published our new [environment statement](#), from which the above quote is taken. Our work in this area has been ongoing for some time, and we're also really proud of the [good practice examples document](#) we can now share with you. This is intended as a working document, and will be updated as our thinking and practices evolve. We also hope this work can inspire others in the voluntary sector to reflect on their own organisational and personal practices.

Our full statement and good practice document are [now available on our website](#) to read, download and share. Please do [get in touch with us](#) if you'd like to discuss the statement, possible collaborations, or ideas and good practice examples from your own organisations.

Current services

We have recently launched a **new community probation support service** in collaboration with the charity [Advance](#), offering individual support for women on probation during pregnancy and early motherhood. Having worked with women

involved in the criminal justice system for the last 25 years, we understand the added stress that women face when they are on probation, and our friendly and informal support is designed to help women feel positive and confident about their choices around pregnancy, birth and motherhood, whatever other issues they face in their lives. We are working in-person with women in London, and offering remote support to women in several regions across the South East of England.

In September we re-launched our **community antenatal classes and mother and baby groups**. It has been a delight to meet with women in-person on a more regular basis again, and to watch them connect over shared experiences, wellbeing activities and lunches. We've also loved getting to meet some of the wonderful babies born during the pandemic, and being able to work alongside our brilliant team of volunteers again. In addition to these in-person services, we are continuing to work remotely with pregnant women and mothers on the community caseload who don't yet feel ready for group settings, providing varied, personalised and flexible support.

Our new **peer support project at Peterborough prison** is well underway now, with five serving residents now trained to support women in prison during pregnancy and early motherhood, as well as women who are coming up for release, connecting them with maternity and wider healthcare services in the community. The support and advocacy work being done by the new peer supporters has been invaluable from the start, and it has been brilliant to watch them go from strength to strength.

In **all three of the prisons** we currently work in (Peterborough, Bronzefield and Foston Hall) we have been busy supporting and advocating for women at various stages of their pregnancy and in early motherhood, including those applying for Mother and Baby Unit places, those dealing with pregnancy losses, those separated from infants in the community, and those coming up to release - some of whom will hopefully move through to our new community probation support service. We are delighted to have more of a physical presence in some of the prisons as more restrictions have eased, and we look forward to restarting more in-person work in the coming months. As with our community services, we are also continuing to work with some women remotely, via phone, email and post.

Our Lived Experience Team (LET)

Our incredible team of women with lived experience continues to go grow and develop, and members have been involved in some really interesting and vital work recently. This has included:

- a review of [Birthrights' factsheets](#) about pregnancy and childbirth;
- a focus group for the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) to share experiences of social care when entering prison pregnant;
- an interview on experiences of separation from a baby, also for the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#);
- a focus group with [Oxford University](#) to help write a funding bid for research examining information given to women during the postnatal period;
- ongoing advisory work with the [Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists \(RCOG\)](#) on the National Maternity and Perinatal Audit, which examines racial and socioeconomic inequalities in maternity care;
- ongoing advisory work with the [Social Care Institute of Excellence \(SCIE\)](#), feeding into a review of policy and practice relating to Mother and Baby Unit applications.

Our LET members were also central to the development of our new campaign to end the imprisonment of pregnant women with [Level Up](#) and [Women in Prison](#), working to design and plan the campaign from the very start. Members have been sharing their experiences with journalists and TV producers over the past few weeks to help improve public understanding of what it's really like to be pregnant in prison, which has helped us bring a huge amount of attention to this issue. We know it can be really difficult to revisit traumatic experiences in this sort of work, and we thank our LET members for their dedication and expertise.

We're also delighted to announce that a third member of our LET has joined our Board of Trustees. It is vital that lived experience informs all of our decisions and we are so pleased to welcome another new member to the board.

Influencing policy and practice

We welcomed the publication last month of [the new MoJ/HMPPS policy framework](#) on pregnancy, mother and baby units (MBUs) and maternal separation from children up to the age of two in women's prisons. This framework, and the guidance that will accompany it, were in development for a long time, and we are proud of the level to which Birth Companions has been able to shape it. Our LET members played a central role in this process; they helped us to push for the framework to expand its focus beyond MBUs, and their influence is clear throughout these new mandatory standards – the first to apply to pregnancy and maternal separation in the prison system. [Read our full response to the policy framework.](#)

Kirsty Kitchen, our Head of Policy and Communications, spoke at two recent events for the [British Association of Social Workers \(BASW\)](#). The first of these looked at the specific challenges to working effectively with pregnant women and mothers of infants subject to care proceedings while in prison, and the second focused on the value of pre-birth specialism in children's social care.

We were also delighted to host a day-long online conference with the [Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University](#), to explore the intersections between the criminal justice system and children's social services during pregnancy and early motherhood. The event brought together front-line professionals, women with lived experience, commissioners, academics and policymakers to discuss the potential for restoring and renewing holistic approaches to work with pregnant women and mothers of infants on the 'edge of care' and those subject to pre-birth assessments and newborn care proceedings who also have CJS involvement. Following on from this event, we will be creating a dedicated, open and accessible webpage to host recordings from the day and other relevant resources; we will share details of this in the coming weeks. Please contact [Kirsty](#) if you would like any further information.

And finally...

...a couple of interesting upcoming events:

Tuesday 26th October from 3-5pm: [Level Up will be holding a family-friendly rally in St James' Park](#), to push for change in the way pregnant women are sentenced as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is debated in the House of Lords.

Saturday 13th November from 11am-12pm: [The Being Human festival will hosting a '500 Years of Childbirth' interactive event online](#), where a historian of medicine and a practising doula will compare how people dealt with childbirth in the past and today.