



Dear friends,

We hope you had a happy, healthy and peaceful festive season and that you are enjoying 2022 so far. A quick update from us here, as our services restart after the winter break and we look ahead to a busy year.

If you would like any further information on our work, or would like to discuss ways to get involved, please [let us know](#).

Thanks as always for your support.

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## Prisons and Probation Ombudsman report

The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's (PPO) [report on the death of Baby B at HMP Styal](#), published on 11 January 2022, was the second report in less than six months to have investigated the death of a baby in an English prison. The findings in this case are deeply shocking and remind us all of the huge risks posed by pregnancy and birth in the prison environment. Our thoughts are with the mother, Louise, and all those who care for her at this incredibly difficult time.

While the circumstances of Louise and her baby, Brooke, are very specific, there are common themes captured by both this investigation and that into [the death of Baby A in HMP Bronzefield](#) (published [by the PPO in September 2021](#)). Both cases show women's calls for help being ignored, and both show women's experiences of trauma and abuse being overlooked in the assessment of their needs. What is particularly clear from this latest report is that the limitations the prison system creates in terms of access to appropriate healthcare are so great that the risks associated with pregnancy and birth cannot be safely accommodated in that system.

While the prison and healthcare services must respond in detail to the individual and systemic failings highlighted by both cases, these deaths must result in a clear and conscious decision to [avoid the imprisonment of pregnant women in all but the most exceptional of circumstances](#).

Read Birth Companions' [full response to the PPO report on the death of Baby Brooke here](#). For more information on our work in this area, please contact [Kirsty](#).

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## Climate and sustainability

*"We recognise we have a collective duty to act now to mitigate the impact of this crisis, as part of our commitment to providing mothers and babies with the best futures, whatever their circumstances."*

The quote above is taken from our recently published [environment and sustainability statement](#), which is accompanied by examples of [good practice](#). We hope to use these to spark conversations and reflections on sustainability across the voluntary sector, and we have been delighted with the response we've received so far.

We've had some very productive discussions with voluntary sector colleagues working in the maternity and criminal justice systems, and trustee Viv Gray recently [presented at a seminar on the environmental crisis for charity trustees](#), which allowed us to connect and share ideas with leaders working across a range of issues.

Please [get in touch](#) if you'd like to discuss our statement, possible collaborations, or ideas and good practice examples from your own organisation.

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## Current services

After much consideration we decided to offer our **community antenatal course** remotely – in the form of postal information packs and regular telephone check-ins – for the first part of this year, and we plan to resume in-person classes in the Spring. Our remote antenatal model continues to work well as it allows us to engage with pregnant women who may not feel comfortable in group settings due to current high COVID rates.

Our staff and volunteers are continuing to support women both remotely and in-person around the time of their **births**, offering emotional, practical and advocacy support; coordinating taxi transport to and from hospitals; and visiting women both at home and in maternity units.

Our **community mother and baby group** is continuing to run in-person, and it has been wonderful to see the bonds growing between the women attending the group over the past few months. We're so pleased to be able to offer our postnatal services in-person, though we continue to offer telephone support to those new mothers who can't attend the group.

As part of an exciting partnership with [Advance](#), we are now offering our antenatal and postnatal services to **women on probation** in London and the South East. You can find more information on this new service [here](#).

In the **prisons**, we were delighted to be able to restart our antenatal group in one site in November – the first antenatal group session we've held since the start of the pandemic – and last month we also held the first session of our new wellbeing group for pregnant women at a second site. Both these groups will run in the prisons alongside our continuing one-to-one support for pregnant women, new mothers, and women separated from their babies.

Our **peer support project** at HMP Peterborough continues to go from strength to strength, despite the constantly-changing COVID landscape in the prison. Our hugely dedicated peer supporters have now completed their training and are actively providing perinatal and healthcare support to women in the prison and on the Mother and Baby Unit.

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## Our Lived Experience Team

Our Lived Experience Team (LET) members have been involved in some fascinating research over the past few months, with several pieces of work specifically exploring topics around social services involvement and the separation of mothers and babies. These have included:

- Research into the experiences of mothers with mental ill health whose infants are in contact with children's social services, with King's College London.
- A project to co-produce 'Hope Boxes' to be given to mothers and babies going through separation, led by the [Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University](#). A film about the project is currently in production, and the Hope Boxes themselves will be piloted in several locations around the country over the coming months.

Members of the LET were also involved in [research exploring why pregnant women are being given custodial sentences](#), published this month by Dr Rona Epstein and Dr Geraldine Brown at Coventry University. LET members were able to both advise the researchers on the design of their survey, and to take part in the research itself. The report argues for a completely different approach to the sentencing of pregnant women. You can read more about Rona and Geraldine's work in this great piece from [the Observer](#).

Thank you, as always, to our incredibly insightful and dedicated Lived Experience Team.

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## In case you missed it...

**Watch...** [this interview with Chidiebere Ibe](#), a Nigerian medical student, talking about his [illustration of a Black fetus in a womb](#) (which went viral on social media recently) and why diversity in medical illustrations is so important.

**Read...** [this Guardian article](#), which highlighted new evidence of the direct impact of the climate crisis on infant health.

**Listen...** to [Rev Dr Michael Banner on Radio 4's \*Thought for the Day\*](#), reflecting on the imprisonment of pregnant women - *"We should worry about the women who enter a system that is certainly not designed to provide care to expectant mothers and their unborn children"*.

This message is from Birth Companions  
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