



Birth Companions COVID-19 Impact Report

1st April 2020 – 30th Sept 2020

Birth Companions is a national charity working to improve the lives of pregnant women, new mothers and babies experiencing multiple disadvantage. We provide frontline services for this important group; fight to improve their safety and the care they receive; and work to put women's voices at the heart of decision-making. During this most challenging of years, we have achieved more than ever to support women and babies who are in greater need than ever before.

Our services during the pandemic

The women we support face a range of difficulties which can often make their pregnancy and the birth of their baby a time of anxiety, stress and hardship. These can include being in prison, immigration issues, homelessness, poverty, poor mental ill-health, involvement with social services and a history of domestic violence or sexual abuse. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women have been more isolated, vulnerable and at risk than ever, experiencing huge challenges accessing basic necessities, health care and the support they need from statutory services.

The pandemic impacted significantly on the delivery of our frontline services. Prisons introduced extremely restricted regimes, meaning visits weren't possible and women were confined in their cells for up to 23.5 hours a day. Visits and groups in the community were suspended. But despite the challenges of the last six months, through the incredibly hard work of the Birth Companions' staff team, volunteers and supporters, we adapted all our services, including those in prisons, to ensure we continued to provide the women the support they need to give their babies the best possible start in life, whatever their circumstances.

We were asked by NHS England to provide support to all pregnant women and new mothers being released from prison during the pandemic. So, we set up a national helpline and have been liaising with partners across the country to ensure that women have the specialist, holistic support they need during this challenging time. We have been able to reach more women across a wider geographical area through these remote services. This has provided a valuable opportunity to explore how we reach women in prisons where we don't have a face to face presence and so far we have supported women released from eight prisons across the country. For women remaining in prison, our work has included supporting them via phone, email and letter; sending out information and resources; and supporting prison officers and families of prisoners.

We also adapted our community services to meet the increased needs of the women on our current caseloads and to support new referrals. This work includes supporting women with multiple issues via phone, email and letter; sending out information and resources; providing women with more essential practical items; and paying for phone top-ups and black taxis to hospital so women can reach hospital safely when they go into labour. We have continued supporting women's births in hospitals, and where this has not been possible, our volunteers have still supported labouring women over the phone.

Our other work during the pandemic

In addition to delivering our services since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have:

- Led the campaign to secure the early release of pregnant women, new mothers and their babies from prison during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure their safety, and challenged the low levels of releases in the months that followed.
- Together with partners across the voluntary sector, worked to raise awareness of the mental health impacts of the intensive lockdown regime in place in prisons during COVID-19 and the impact of mothers' separation from their children as a result of the end of family visits.
- Worked intensively with the HMPPS Women's Team to widen the focus of the new Policy Framework for Mother and Baby Units to address the needs of all pregnant women and new mothers across the prison estate, including those separated from their babies. This has led to the Women's Team announcing that enhanced training for prison officers, resident pregnancy, mother and baby specialists in every prison, and a new national stakeholder forum will be included in the new guidance published in the coming months.
- As restrictions are tightened again in English prisons, including the suspension of social visits, Birth Companions and 22 other charities and academics have publicly written to the Secretary of State for Justice Robert Buckland calling on the government to make a renewed commitment to a swift, effective programme of early release for eligible pregnant women and mothers and babies on Mother and Baby Units (MBUs) and extend this early release scheme to include eligible mothers of children under the age of two in the community across the estate. Read our full letter [here](#).
- Published [From Now On...](#) a policy manifesto setting out our vision and strategy focus for the coming months.
- Published [Your Inside Guide to Pregnancy, Birth and Motherhood in Prison](#), an illustrated guide for women and their supporters.

The support we offered

During the reporting period of 1st April 2020 and 30th November 2020 we supported 179 women. These include:

- 88 women in nine prisons

- 91 women in the community in London
- 38 women supported through our antenatal services in the community
- 59 women we supported 1:1 around the time of their babies birth
- 20 women were supported through our postnatal services in the community
- 161 women we supported with practical items including emergency baby boxes, personal care items, taxis to help them reach hospital safely during their labour, activity and learning packs, phone tops ups to enable women to stay in touch with family and friends

Impact

Of the women we surveyed about the impact of their support from Birth Companions during this period:

- 100% said it helped improve their health and wellbeing
- 95% said it helped reduce their isolation
- 100% said it helped them give their babies the best possible start in life.
- 90% were very satisfied with the support they received

"I had fantastic support during a very difficult period. The BC team have been amazing! The baby box was so thoughtful and incredibly helpful – I was very touched by it"

Elsa's Story

We began supporting Elsa in February 2020, a month before the UK went in lockdown. She was extremely distressed and overwhelmed by the complexities of her situation and the number of issues she was then dealing with which included; financial hardship; trauma following the previous removal of a child; Social Services involvement; substance misuse; social isolation as a lone parent and a history of complex mental health issues.

We had planned that Elsa would attend our Community Antenatal classes – she was keen to learn more about her birth choices and to engage with information about early parenting information. Unfortunately our groups were forced to close in late March. Our Community Classes Coordinator adapted our services, developing a remote support model so she could continue to offer Elsa one-to-one support through regular phone calls, and sent her a series of antenatal education course packs, developed in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

As well as the emotional and practical support we offered Elsa, we liaised closely with other professionals supporting including her midwife, social workers, and drug support caseworker. We helped Elsa access the essential practical items she needed for her baby including an emergency Baby Box, also developed specifically for new mothers during the COVID-19 crisis by our partner organisation PramDepot.

Elsa was moved to a Parenting Assessment Unit a week before her due date and we continued support her until she gave birth. On the day Elsa went into hospital to deliver her baby by caesarean section, we arranged a black taxi to take her to hospital; and another to take her back to the Unit when she was discharged from hospital.

After her baby was born, one of our volunteers arranged to speak to Elsa over the phone each week to provide emotional support and answer any questions she might have about parenting a new baby. Elsa told us that our support had

helped her to feel more positive about her situation; less overwhelmed by the challenges she was facing and less isolated during lockdown.

Kari's Story

Our Release Line was set soon after the start of lockdown to support women being released from prison during the pandemic. We were contacted by a Probation Officer about Kari in April. Kari was a foreign national woman with no recourse to public funds and a history of domestic and sexual violence and trafficking. Her pregnancy was only confirmed in prison when she was five months' pregnant.

We were not able to visit the prison because of COVID-19 restrictions, but we sent Kari information and resources about pregnancy and some maternity clothes. We asked the prison to add our number to Kari's personal calls list so that she was able to call us directly from her room in the prison if she needed to talk, or had any questions relating to her pregnancy. As her release approached, we were able to offer valuable emotional support and reassurance. We also learned that she had a seven year old daughter who was living in West Africa with her grandparents – Kari was very worried about her as she had been unable to contact her since being taken into custody.

When Kari was released, the prison's 'through the gate' support service was not operating due to COVID restrictions. Kari was given a travel warrant for a bus and train to get her to a lunchtime probation appointment 25 miles away from the prison, with all her possessions. She had no phone. We were very concerned about a heavily pregnant Kari having to manage all her possessions and travelling by public transport during the pandemic. The prison was unable to authorise a taxi for Kari, so we arranged for a taxi to meet her at the gate. The taxi got her to her probation appointment on time and then took her to her accommodation in a hostel.

We also arranged to send practical items that she needed for her baby directly to her accommodation so they would be ready for her as soon as she arrived there. Kari was provided with a mobile phone by probation but it could only be used for incoming calls. She was still very isolated after release as she was unable to make any phone calls. We provided her with a basic smart phone and data, which she could use to make video contact with her young daughter in West Africa.

We continued to support Kari with regular weekly phone calls and referred her to Happy Baby Community; a charity which specialises in the needs of women affected by the immigration system.

Where we go from here

As we said in our policy statement '[From Now On'..](#), we are excited and energised by the opportunities for reflection, learning and change that lie ahead in the coming months and years. We look forward to continuing work with our many partners and supporters as we start to move beyond the pandemic, in order to ensure that every woman is able to give her baby the best possible start in life, whatever her circumstances.