Website content for the Lived Experience Team

**Lived Experience Team**

The women we support at Birth Companions are at the center of everything we do. It is vital therefore, that women who have experienced our support are consulted about the way we work and shape our services in the future. The Lived Experience Team (LET) was set-up early in 2018 and has grown from strength to strength.

Primary aims are to;

* Support Birth Companions
* Help improve our services
* Take part in research
* Take part in involvement opportunities

**What are involvement opportunities?**

‘Involvement’ or ‘engagement‘ opportunities involves talking with maternity providers, commissioners, government bodies and charities involved with maternity or criminal justice systems. Sharing your experiences can help shape the future and drive positive change. Involvement is about having a say in the decisions that are made.

**What do we want to achieve?**

We want the voice of women facing challenges in pregnancy and early parenting to be heard. Our motivation is to influence systems as a whole. This involves people delivering frontline services, who have some ability to change the way they work, and how they support others. It also involves people who commission service (they decide where and how money is spent) who have the power to make more wide scale changes.

We want to ensure that those who commission, design and deliver services have an understanding of the challenges women face. Put most simply, that support services are working and that the key issues faced by women are addressed.

**Why join?**

Many women join because they feel they want to give something back and to stay involved with the charity. Women often say that the support they experienced was a lifeline and we are heartened that women feel so strongly about the care we gave.

If you have been supported by us, or if you faced challenges in pregnancy or early parenting and feel you would like to share your experiences to help others, please do get in contact. Whilst the majority of the LET were supported by us, we are keen to offer this opportunity more widely.

If you join the LET, you will be supported in all engagement opportunities by the team manager Kate Chivers and by Kirsty Kitchen, our policy and media advisor. Everything we do at Birth Companions is approached in a woman-centered way, which means your well-being is our highest priority.

**How to join?**

In order to join the LET you will need to register your interest with a member of staff, or contact the info@ email address. You will then be contacted by Kate Chivers, who manages the team. You will then be added to the group email and will begin to receive emails about events and opportunities you may wish to be involved in. You can choose which opportunities you are interested in and there is no pressure to take part in anything. These may be meetings, workshops, events or online surveys. You can pick and choose what interests you and take part when you are able. If you commit to something and then are unable to continue, this is also fine, we understand that events in life sometimes mean we need to take a break from involvement.

**Expenses**

All travel expenses will be paid and we also aim to pay for childcare to enable you to attend. Some opportunities offer a voucher to take part and for others, you may be offered London Living Wage (£10.55 ph.) to attend. We aim to compensate you for the time you give. The exception to this is online surveys or phone calls which may be on a voluntary basis.

**Examples of engagement**

* We held a meeting to look at the language we use in Birth Companions leaflets and on our website. This was to ensure that women we support felt we were using the right language to describe their situations.
* Four women from the LET took part in a workshop to develop trauma-informed guidelines for perinatal mental health services
* We took part in an on-line consultation for the Women’s Mental Health Network to help them identify their top three campaigning priorities.
* We took part in an online survey for the 2018 HMPPS Probation Service Review.

**How do we assess impact?**

To offer an example, following the meeting to discuss the language we use, and how we refer to the women who are supported by us, as a charity we have now adopted a different approach. When we are presenting to funders or commissioners, we use the language we know you are comfortable with. Some words did not feel right and some new descriptions were found.

When we engage in other work with government bodies, or commissioners we seek feedback on the engagement to let the LET know the impact of the work.

Women tell us that they feel positive about attending events or taking part in research. They say that they feel heard and attending events helps build confidence and skills.