



Lived Experience Team

The women we support at Birth Companions are at the centre 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. Our Lived Experience Team (LET) was set-up early in 2018 and has grown from strength to strength. We now have more than 40 members who are committed to using their personal experiences to benefit others.

The primary aims of our Lived Experience Team are:

- To support Birth Companions' work
- To help improve our services
- To take part in research
- To take part in opportunities to influence policy and practice both locally and nationally

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 who deliver frontline services, who have some ability to change the way they work, and how they support others.

It also involves people who commission services (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.

What are the opportunities to be involved in influencing policy and practice?

These opportunities can involve 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.

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 online 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.

Why join?

Whilst the majority of the LET were supported by us, we are keen to offer this opportunity more widely.

Many women join because they feel they want to give something back. Women often say that the support they experienced from Birth Companions was a lifeline and we are heartened that women feel so strongly about the care we gave them.

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.

If you join the LET, you will be supported by Kate Chivers, our Engagement Manager, and Kirsty Kitchen, our Head of Policy and Communications. Everything we do at Birth Companions is approached in a woman-centred way, which means your well-being is our highest priority.

How to join?

If you are interested in being part of our LET, you can tell any member of Birth Companions' staff if you are still in regular contact with us or you can email Kate (kate@birthcompanions.org.uk) who can discuss joining with you in more detail.

Once you are part of the team you will begin to receive emails about events and opportunities you may wish to be involved in. These may be meetings, workshops, events or online surveys. You can pick and choose which opportunities you are interested in and there is no pressure to take part in anything. If you commit to something and then are unable to continue, this is also fine; we understand that events in life sometime mean you may need to take a break from involvement.

Payment

To show our appreciation for you sharing your knowledge and experiences, and to recognise your time and commitment to supporting our charitable aims, Birth Companions will pay and meet the expenses of all members participating in consultations and research projects. This includes:

- Daily/half-day fee
- Travel
- Subsistence
- Childcare

There may be some circumstances where an alternative to money is offered, such as a voucher for completing an online survey, and this will be clearly communicated in advance.

How do we assess impact?

When we engage in work with government bodies or commissioners, we seek feedback so we can inform the LET about impact of their participation.

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 their confidence and skills.