

Call to improve pre- and postnatal care in prisons

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By [Steve Ford](#) News Editor



The government must ensure better care for pregnant women and new mothers in prison, according to a charity that has launched a new “birth charter” to address current shortcomings.

[Birth Companions](#), a charity specialising in the support of pregnant women and new mothers in prison, published its [Birth Charter for women in prisons in England and Wales](#) on Thursday.

“Many pregnant women and new mothers in prison are incredibly vulnerable”

Naomi Delap

It sets out recommendations for ministers and the Prison Service on improving care for the 600 pregnant women and 100 new mothers held in prisons in England and Wales each year.

The charity said it wanted to highlight good practice, but also failures to comply with legislation to protect the health and wellbeing of pregnant women and new mothers in prison.

The charter covers aspects ranging from antenatal care and birthing partners to breastfeeding, family visits and counselling.

Among its recommendations, it said regular antenatal clinics should be provided in prisons and run by a specialist team of midwives.

In addition, it said all pregnant women should, where possible, have access to a scan at a regular clinic inside the prison and where it needed to happen in hospital, prison officers should not be present during medical consultations.

Pregnant women in prison should be able to speak to a midwife 24 hours a day about any concerns she may have, either in person or by phone, said the charter.

At night, it said there should be a timely response to buzzers and once a woman had been assessed by a midwife, prison staff should facilitate timely access to hospital when advised to do so.

The document is supported by the Royal College of Midwives and has been produced with guidance from UNICEF UK's Baby Friendly Initiative.

"The birth charter gives a much-needed voice to pregnant women and new mothers in prison"

Sue Ashmore

Alongside the charter, Birth Companions is calling on the government to create a Prison Service Order to help it provide "consistent, humane care for women".

Naomi Delap, director of Birth Companions, said: "Many pregnant women and new mothers in prison are incredibly vulnerable, yet despite several pieces of national and international legislation protecting their health and wellbeing, many do not get the care and support to which they and their babies are entitled.

"Although there are lots of examples of good work, there are also inconsistencies and shortcomings that must be addressed urgently, so we've developed the birth charter, with input from a wide range of professionals and service users," she said.

"We have focused attention on the elements that have the biggest practical impact to ensure these women get the support they need, and are able to give their children the best possible start in life," said Ms Delap.

She noted that providing the right support for pregnant women and new mothers in prison was a "complex issue, requiring careful and balanced consideration".

"While we support the government's commitment to exploring community-based alternatives to detention, we mustn't overlook the valuable support provided in prison-based Mother and Baby Units," she added.

"We have real concerns about the capacity for Community Rehabilitation Companies and Probation Services to deliver that same level of support," warned Ms Delap.

Royal College of Midwives chief executive Cathy Warwick said: "It doesn't matter where mothers and babies are – they must all be given the highest standards of care to promote their health and wellbeing.

She said the college was “proud” to support the charter and its recommendations. If implemented in full, it would “make a massive difference to the quality of care women receive and help create a culture whereby all babies are given the best start in life”, she said.

Sue Ashmore, programme director of UNICEF UK’s Baby Friendly Initiative, added: “To protect the rights and welfare of innocent babies born in prison, mothers must receive the same support with feeding and bonding as they would in the community.

“The birth charter gives a much-needed voice to pregnant women and new mothers in prison, helping to ensure that no baby is punished for being born in detention,” she said.

Birth charter

Pregnant women in prison should:

- have access to the same standard of antenatal care as women in the community
- be able to attend antenatal classes and prepare for their baby’s birth
- be housed, fed and moved in a way that ensures the wellbeing of mother and baby
- be told whether they have a place on a Mother and Baby Unit as soon as possible after arriving in prison
- have appropriate support if electing for termination of pregnancy

During childbirth, women should:

- have access to a birth supporter of their choice
- be accompanied by officers who have had appropriate training and clear guidance
- be provided with essential items for labour and the early postnatal period
- receive appropriate care during transfer between prison and hospital

Women with babies in prison should:

- be encouraged and supported in their chosen method of infant feeding
- be supported to express, store and transport their breast
- be given the same opportunities and support to nurture and bond with their babies as women in the community
- be entitled to additional family visits

All pregnant women and new mothers should:

- be able to access counselling when needed
- receive appropriate resettlement services after release from prison