



Birth Companions

Annual Report
2011-2012

Summary

Birth Companions is a unique organisation, set up in 1996 to provide a much-needed service to pregnant women and new mothers in HMP Holloway. Being pregnant, giving birth and becoming a mother is a hugely important and life-changing time for a woman.

Our overall aim is to improve the well-being of pregnant women and new mothers who are, have been or are at risk of being detained. We do this by:

- Improving their mental health
- Reducing their isolation
- Enabling them to give their babies the best possible start in life
- Improving their conditions

Research has shown that if a woman feels well-supported around the time of giving birth she is better able to look after her baby. We believe that support is particularly important for pregnant women and new mothers in prison as they are one of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of women in Britain.

We also believe that if women are supported in bonding with their babies and are encouraged to feel positive about their role as a mother at this very early stage, this will provide them with a strong basis for parenting in the future and they will be less likely to re-offend.



Our Services

Our dedicated team of volunteers and staff make it possible for Birth Companions to provide a much-needed service to this group of vulnerable women. We go into Holloway Prison on a weekly basis to make contact with pregnant women and new mothers and discuss their concerns.

The services we offer are:

- **Antenatal support** – this involves offering women a weekly pregnancy group and/or one-to-one support from a birth companion to discuss their pregnancy or the birth of their baby. Helping women to draw up a birth plan.
- **Birth support** – this includes helping a woman through her labour, offering emotional support and companionship and being her advocate if needed.
- **Postnatal support** – this includes providing breastfeeding advice if required and support with the new baby both in hospital and on the Mother and Baby Unit (MBU) in HMP Holloway. We also support mothers who are separating from their baby both at the hospital and in prison.
- **Community support** – this service targets the most vulnerable pregnant women and new mothers in the community who are isolated and have no-one else to turn to. We provide emotional support and put them in touch with local health professionals and parenting services to make sure that they can access the support they need.

Working for change

Our day-to-day support work makes us very aware of the areas where improvements are needed in the treatment of pregnant women and new mothers in detention. Our service also provides an important model for similar services in the UK and abroad. We therefore seek to improve awareness about the needs of the women we work with, as well as to support other groups seeking to offer support to pregnant women in detention in other parts of the country

Report from the Chair of Trustees

Once again, this has been an extremely busy year for Birth Companions. We have seen a 22% increase in the number of women we supported compared to last year, with a 33% rise in the amount of support we provided. This demonstrates that we not only supported more women, but that we also delivered more intensive support to those women. In addition, we have seen large increases in the number of women we have supported in the community, the number of women we have supported through separation from their baby, as well as the number of births we have attended. Over the year, we provided 44 women in Holloway prison with breastfeeding support and information; compared with women in the community from similar backgrounds, the breastfeeding rates on the Mother and Baby Unit are significantly high.

An important development for us this year has been the expansion of our Community Link service. As well as supporting women after their release from prison, we are now also working with vulnerable and isolated women who may be at risk of detention having experienced such issues as substance misuse, poverty and social deprivation. A clinical psychologist working with vulnerable women who have experienced sexual violence or abuse, many of whom are refugees and asylum seekers, described her experience of the support we provided:

“The recent work of Birth Companions with two of my patients has been inspiring. They have felt empowered and have no doubt benefited enormously from Birth Companion’s advocacy, support and sensitivity, with significant impact on their mental health. I have no doubt that this will in turn have far-reaching positive implications for such women’s capacity to mother their children and to form strong attachments.”

I find it hard to describe the amazing support that our staff and volunteers provide to the women we work with. Equally, I am well aware that we cannot do this without our funders and partners in the prison, hospital and local community. I would therefore like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all those who contribute in so many different ways to the work of Birth Companions.



**Diana Parkinson,
Chair of Trustees**

Director's Report

At our first ever Service User forum which was held this year, it was incredibly moving to hear of the difference that Birth Companions makes to the lives of the women we support in HMP Holloway. All of the women who attended had since left prison, but took the time to come back and share their views on our services. They all said how much they had valued the support we were able to give them. They told us they felt safe with us, and that it often felt like we were the only ones that cared. It was an emotional day as they remembered some of their most difficult times, but also an inspiring one as they talked of their determination to provide the best for their children.

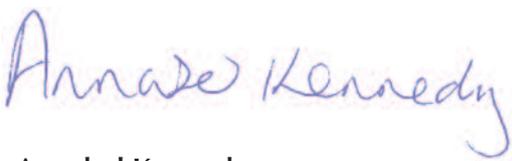
Over the last year we have been extending our service supporting vulnerable women in the community who need additional help during pregnancy, birth and through the initial period of caring for their babies. Some need our support due to their isolation, others due to their experiences of abuse and torture. For many the idea of giving birth is overwhelming and terrifying. Our fantastic volunteers are there to hold their hand and reassure them they are safe. Helping to make the moment they meet their new baby as special as it should be for all. We have also provided practical support. For the woman who moved into a completely empty flat with a 3 day old baby, our first task was to find her a bed. Through the generosity of our supporters we were able to ensure she had the essentials she needed.

All the women we supported this year have their own individual struggles and difficulties to face. Some of them with unimaginable trauma in their past. However we have been able to alleviate their suffering through the delivery of flexible, sensitive and individualised services. We have been able to support and encourage them towards a more positive future. We have shared some really special moments with many of them.

We continue through challenging times with many changes in the criminal justice system and a difficult economic situation. Birth Companions is not immune to these pressures but we will carry on planning for a sustainable and secure future for our work.

We would not be able to do any of this without the incredible women who make up our staff and volunteer team and I was delighted when Birth Companions was awarded the Una Padel Award 2011. This was in recognition of the great job the team do and was richly deserved. I continue to be proud to count myself as one of this group of really inspirational women.

As ever I owe a huge thank you to all our volunteers, staff, Trustees, supporters and partners who make our work possible.



Annabel Kennedy
Director

Jakeline's Story

I am a Spanish-speaking woman, mother of four children! I found out I was pregnant just days before I was arrested and brought to this prison.

When I was told about the Birth Companions meetings by other women, I was not really interested, to tell you the truth. It seemed too much of an effort, besides the fact that I did not speak any English!

One day one of the Birth Companions came to talk to me in my own language and when she explained what it was about and how they could help me, I decided to come along happily!

To me it is something unforgettable to find myself in a foreign country without family and friends, unable to speak the local language and in a completely different culture and yet find the moral, emotional and practical support of a group like Birth Companions. They supported me throughout my long labour and birth! I had a long stay in hospital and they came to visit me and my baby regularly. I have no words to thank the excellent support BC offered me and my baby.

My daughter was born with Down's Syndrome and breastfeeding became more challenging! The birth companions supported me throughout with lots of encouragement, patience and practical suggestions regarding different positions and what to pay attention to when putting my baby to the breast. When back in prison in the Mother and Baby Unit, I enjoyed the baby massage sessions... good to relax my baby and create a strong and more special bond with her. Had I been out in the community, I doubt I would have attended this kind of service! My daughter is going to be a year old soon and I still have Birth Companions support.

BC is an excellent group! They help women and babies in prison. A thousand thank yous for all your support!

Jakeline

Translated from the Spanish by Lola Alcaraz

Overview of the year

The majority of the women we support continue to be from Holloway prison. However, we are also extending the work that we do with women in the community who are vulnerable and isolated around the time of birth.

This year we provided support to 89 women during pregnancy, birth and early parenting. This involved:

- **263 contacts** with 71 pregnant women in prison and in the community.
- **58 contacts** with 15 women giving birth, and in the following hours or days while in hospital.
- **369 postnatal contacts** with 43 new mothers in prison and the community.
- **113 contacts** to support 44 women with breastfeeding.
- **65 visits** to 10 vulnerable women in the community.
- **124 prison visits** by volunteers and staff to make contact with women, provide support, and represent the group.
- **a 24-hour, 7-day a week** birth support phone line, run by our volunteers.
- **a weekly postnatal group** on the Mother and Baby Unit to support women with breastfeeding and early parenthood.
- **a weekly antenatal group** for pregnant women in Holloway Prison.

We support a widely diverse group of women. Of the 51 women who completed our registration forms, two-thirds were from ethnic minority groups and over a third of women were foreign nationals. Women came from a number of countries including India, Spain, Eritrea, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Nigeria, China, Serbia, Burundi & Mongolia. A third of women did not speak English as their first language and 10% of women were under 21.

In the prison, 48 pregnancy groups were run during the year, covering topics such as breathing, positions for labour and baby feeding. In these groups we aimed to provide women with a supportive space to focus on their pregnancy and their baby. One woman wrote:

I felt a huge amount of support. I was able to share my experiences with the other girls and the birth companions without fear of judgement. I was never asked why I was here and for the 2 hours of the group I didn't feel I was in prison. It just felt like we were all mums looking forward to our new arrivals with no stress.

We also saw women on a one to one basis to discuss particular concerns and helped 18 women in the prison to write birth plans.

On the Mother and Baby Unit (MBU), we ran 48 sessions with mothers and their babies covering early parenting topics such as feeding and sleeping, as well as giving women a chance to debrief after their births and discuss their feelings about becoming a mum.

Both our pregnancy and postnatal groups enabled women to share their previous birth and parenting experiences, and their hopes and fears for the future. In addition to the support women had from the birth companions, it was very positive to see the peer support that developed between women in these groups.

We supported 12 women giving birth from the prison in hospital and were on call for several other women who were unsure about whether family would be able to arrive in time. Nine of these births were situations where mothers were separating from their babies and the birth companion was there to support women with their feelings and to enable them to give their babies the best possible start in difficult circumstances.

Postnatally, we also visited these mothers back at the prison and some of them chose to continue coming to our pregnancy group, as they found this helpful. One mother, in this situation, spoke about expressing milk for her baby over several weeks and inspired other women in the pregnancy group, who later did not get a place with their baby on the MBU, to do the same.

This year, we gave breastfeeding information and support to 44 women and breastfeeding rates on the MBU well exceeded those for women from a similar socioeconomic background in the community.



As well as supporting the mothers on the MBU with breastfeeding, our breastfeeding supporter, Abbi, worked with mothers who were separated and expressing. She also liaised closely with prison officers to ensure that milk was stored and transported safely. Mothers told us that expressing milk made them feel that they were doing something beneficial for their baby, that it enabled them to still feel a connection and that it provided them with a focus which helped them to deal with the separation. One woman said:

They gave me the right amount of advice and support which encouraged me to give it a try - which I loved. I didn't have my son in prison with me unfortunately but they taught me to express so my son could still benefit, which is the best thing I ever did.

An important focus for our work this year has been our Community Link support. Some of this work is with women who have been released from detention but we are also now working with women in the community who are affected by similar issues such as violence, abuse, social deprivation and isolation. Katie, our Community Link Co-ordinator, has expanded our links with referring agencies and ran a new training day for our volunteers on this area of our work. We supported 10 women in the community, providing support that was appropriate to their very different situations. One of our main referrers was the Helen Bamber Foundation, who work with women who have experienced human rights abuses. Our volunteers and staff were able to visit the Foundation to discuss the work we have been doing together and hear an inspiring talk from Helen Bamber about her life and the work of the foundation. The day was one of the highlights of our year.

As well as supporting women around the time of birth, Birth Companions also hope to raise awareness of the needs of the women we work with and to influence good practice and change in this area. To this end, we were pleased to be invited to do a presentation to her Majesty's Inspectors of Prisons and also to attend a Prison Service meeting of Mother and Baby Unit Managers, where we spoke about the work that we do with pregnant women and women who are separating from their babies. We were also invited to speak about our work at a conference in Athens, as part of an EU initiative to develop a programme of groups for mothers in prisons in Greece, Bulgaria and Romania.

At our first Service User forum, women who had used our services in prison and post-release gave us honest and very useful feedback on their experiences. Women felt that they would like to continue to be involved with Birth Companions and we plan to hold further events next year and to develop the role that Service Users play in our organisation.

At the end of the year, we launched our new website which we hope will raise awareness of the needs of the women we work with and be a useful resource for ourselves and others with an interest in this area. This year, we also improved our training programme for new volunteers and took on a large group of enthusiastic trainees. Next year, we are looking forward to seeing these trainees complete their training as birth companions and join our wonderful group of existing volunteers, so that Birth Companions is able to support even more women, as we continue to develop our work.

Denise Marshall, Group Co-ordinator

Women in prison

Women in prison are a small but vulnerable group and the women we support face many challenges.

- In June 2012 there were 4,116 women in prison in England and Wales.
- Home Office research showed that 66% of women in prison have dependent children under 18. Each year it is estimated that more than 17,700 children are separated from their mother by imprisonment.
- At the end of March 2012, foreign nationals were 18% of the female prison population.
- Over half of women prisoners say they have experienced domestic violence and a third say they have experienced sexual abuse. More than a third of women in prison say they have attempted suicide at some time in their life.
- A Prisons Inspectorate survey found that 38% of women in prison did not have accommodation arranged on release. Only a third of women prisoners who wanted help and advice about benefits and debt received it.
- Prison Service figures for April 2005 - Dec 2008, showed that 382 children were born to women prisoners (approx. two births a week).
- There are eight mother and baby units located within prisons and secure training centres in England providing for up to 75 women and babies (one centre is for under 18s).

Women in prison are likely to have complex care and support needs. They are far more likely to have spent time in care during childhood and to have experienced abuse and domestic violence than women in the community.

The majority of women in prison have mental health issues. They are more likely to have a history of drug or alcohol abuse or to have tried to harm themselves in the past than women in the non-prison population. A report on the health of women prisoners concluded that *“women coming into prison had very poor physical, psychological and social health, worse than that of women in social class V, the group within the general population who have the poorest health.”*

In March 2007, the Corston review of vulnerable women in the criminal justice system, commissioned following the deaths of six women at Styal prison, stated: *“Community solutions for non-violent women offenders should be the norm”*. The report concluded that *“There must be a strong consistent message right from the top of government, with full reasons given, in support of its stated policy that prison is not the right place for women offenders who pose no risk to the public.”*

What the mums say

I wasn't feeling optimistic being in prison but being in the group helped me a lot.



Birth companions were amazing. They captured my precious memories on camera. They were there without judging. They made it a happier experience.

(I liked) the fact that I can really talk to any of the birth companions about any worries I might have.

Although we were in prison they made it a positive experience for us.

I felt confident and felt even though my family are so far I was very happy. They were like family to me. I would have been depressed without them.



To have them stay with me throughout my labour... meant the whole world to me.

I received a lot of new information that I could never receive from leaflets. Made me feel more safe as being pregnant in prison is scary.

I did not know much about breastfeeding and I definitely valued their encouragement, advice and support.

Vicky's Story

Becoming a birth companion

I found Birth Companions part way along a road that has ultimately led to me commencing training as a midwife in September 2012. For a long time I have worked with vulnerable people in a variety of roles and settings and had found myself more and more drawn to working with women. And then I came across Birth Companions.



I remember the telephone interview with Denise. I remember a very comfortable discussion about what I felt I could offer Birth Companions and I think this open and easy dialogue marked the beginning of a great relationship between myself and the women of Birth Companions, which has been inspiring and has enabled me to grow and develop as a woman.

The key element of being a trainee or active birth companion, is of course the support for the vulnerable women who have sought our help, but something which has been very important to me, is the sense that being part of that group – attending training and group meetings, becoming a phoneholder and attending social events – has carried me from one part of my life to another in a supported and enriched way.

Of course, being involved in the support of a number of women in the community and hearing my fellow birth companions accounts of their extraordinary work in the prison has been very special. I have been equally impressed by the strength and resilience of the women we work with, as I have with the passion and commitment of our volunteers. I am still incredibly impressed when I hear of the breastfeeding rates in the group of women on the unit on the prison – far higher than the national average. And when I hear snippets of stories from women I have worked with about their backgrounds and reflect on how naturally and instinctively they birth and then parent their children I am often humbled.

I recently supported a woman during her labour and the birth of her healthy baby girl. The woman had been referred to us from the Poppy Project, who support women who have been trafficked to the UK. It was a very powerful experience for me. It was my first birth as a birth companion. Also, more importantly, this woman, who we'll call Flora, was strong, courageous and beautiful. I am so grateful for her allowing me to support her through an experience she was undoubtedly very anxious about, but managed magnificently – instantly falling head over heels in love with her baby, born in pretty tough circumstances. I will never forget Flora.

I often describe us to friends as a moveable village or family – a network of brilliant women ready to assemble around the vulnerable women of London at almost a moment's notice and ensure that these most precious moments in theirs and their babies lives are as they should be – surrounded and supported by women.

Vicky

Financial Summary

In 2011-2012 we brought forward £63,000 from grants received in the previous year and raised a further £130,938. Our total expenditure was £114,822. We therefore carried forward £79,116 into 2012-2013.

The charity was grateful to receive funding from:

- The City Bridge Trust
- The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
- The LankellyChase Foundation
- The LloydsTSB Foundation for England and Wales
- The Pilgrim Trust
- The Rowan Charitable Trust
- The Tulip Charitable Trust
- The Volunteering Fund
- The Wates Foundation

Our summary accounts are as follows:

	Unrestricted Funds	Restricted Funds	Total Funds 2012	Total Funds 2011
INCOMING RESOURCES				
Voluntary income	78,401	52,439	130,840	125,573
Investment income	98	-	98	70
Total incoming resources	78,499	52,439	130,938	125,643
RESOURCES EXPENDED				
Charitable activities	60,558	53,076	113,634	98,287
Governance costs	1,188	-	1,188	1,244
TOTAL RESOURCES EXPENDED	61,746	53,076	114,822	99,531
Net incoming / (outgoing) resources for the year	16,753	(637)	16,116	26,112
Reconciliation of funds				
Total funds brought forward	58,213	4,787	63,000	36,888
TOTAL FUNDS CARRIED FORWARD	74,966	4,150	79,116	63,000

Our accounts have been independently examined and a full set is available on request.

As ever, we would like to thank all those who have helped us during the year...

Honorary President

Sheila Kitzinger

Trustees

Avan Wadia

Cath Longman-Jones - Treasurer

Christine Asbury
(resigned Jan 2012)

Diana Parkinson - Chair

Liz Hogarth
(joined November 2011)

Michele Stokes

Suzanne Collins

Viv Gray

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Anna Wise

Eleanor Stapleton

Jeannie Lorenz

Lea Ouai

Lola Alcaraz

Marjorie Dill

Volunteer Birth Companions

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Amy Kinghorn

Anna Wise

Caroline Holding

Eleanor Stapleton

Jeannie Lorenz

Lea Ouai

Lola Alcaraz

Michele Stokes

Rosalind Simpson

Saradadevil Hull-Jurkovic

Sarah Bayley

Vicky Marcus-Page

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The City Bridge Trust

The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

The LankellyChase Foundation

The LloydsTSB Foundation

The Pilgrim Trust

The Rowan Charitable Trust

The Tulip Charitable Trust

The Volunteering Fund

The Wates Foundation

Patrons

Baroness Helena Kennedy

Professor Lesley Page

Staff

Annabel Kennedy – *Director*

Denise Marshall – *Group
Co-ordinator*

Abbi Ayers – *Breastfeeding
Supporter*

Kate Chivers – *Breastfeeding
Supporter (maternity cover)*

Fumi Okiji – *Information and
Administration Officer*

Anna Wise – *Information and
Administration Officer
(maternity cover)*

Katie Bottle – *Community Link
Co-ordinator*

Phone-holders

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Supporters and advisors

Bridget Baker

Delia Muhammed

Elinor Jansz

LawWorks

Sally Geeve

Simeon Barnes

Simon Davey



PO Box 64597, London SW17 1DR

Tel: 07855 725097

E-mail: info@birthcompanions.org.uk

Website: www.birthcompanions.org.uk

Design: www.sallygeeve.com

Registered Charity Number: 1120934

Birth Companions is also a company limited by guarantee (company number:6269047), registered in England and Wales with a registered office address at:
Dalton House, 60 Windsor Avenue, South Wimbledon, London SW19 2RR