



Strategic Plan 2013-2016



Our values

Our staff and volunteers passionately want to make a difference to the lives of vulnerable women through pregnancy, birth and early motherhood. This has been at the very heart of the organisation since its inception and is something we cherish and protect.

Introduction

Birth Companions provides support to vulnerable pregnant women and new mothers who are, have been or are at risk of being detained. The services we provide aim to:

- improve their mental health and well being
- reduce their isolation
- enable them to give their babies the best possible start in life.

We also seek to raise awareness of the needs of the women we work with and to influence changes in policy and law in order to improve conditions for pregnant women, new mothers and babies in detention.

Our dedicated team of volunteers and staff provide a much-needed service to this group of vulnerable women. The services we offer are:

- Antenatal support – we run a weekly pregnancy group and provide one-to-one support for pregnant women in HMP Holloway
- Birth support – we provide trained volunteers to support women through labour, offering emotional support and companionship and advocacy if needed.
- Postnatal support – we support women in the early postnatal period, providing feeding advice and support with the new baby, both in hospital and on the Mother and Baby Unit in HMP Holloway. We also support mothers who are separating from their baby both at the hospital and in prison.
- Community support – we support 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 and practical support and put them in touch with local health professionals and parenting services to make sure that they can access the support they need.

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Current position

Birth Companions is widely recognised as the only organisation providing high quality, flexible and responsive services to vulnerable pregnant women and new mothers both in prison and the community. We have developed a high level of expertise in this work and our model of service-delivery using a combination of paid staff and volunteers is successful, flexible and cost effective. We work with a range of partners and stakeholders, including HMP Holloway and local midwives.

The need we meet

The support needs of pregnant women and new mothers in prison reflect the multiple and complex needs of female offenders. These include a history of domestic and sexual violence, neglect, time spent in care, substance misuse and mental health problems. The women we support are particularly vulnerable during their pregnancies due to the effects of poor health, poverty, lack of support from family and friends as well as isolation. Women in custody are five times more likely to experience mental health issues than women in the general population and have very poor physical health. Women tell us that their experience of pregnancy, birth and early parenting in prison can be very negative. Research confirms that pregnant women and new mothers in prison feel unsafe, uncared for, uncomfortable and hungry.

We support the most vulnerable women in the community. They often face a range of issues and challenges including mental health problems, a history of domestic and sexual violence, trafficking, experience of detention and human rights violations overseas. Many have faced extreme trauma in their past, and often face poverty and isolation alongside housing and immigration problems.

Pregnancy, birth and early motherhood is a crucial time for women and babies and good support can help women to bring about changes in their lives. This support can enable women to be more confident mothers and give their babies the best possible start in life. It can also be an opportunity for health promotion and to improve the support network of women who are isolated.

The changing world around us

There are many changes in both the criminal justice and health landscapes which may affect our services. There will be significant changes in the criminal justice system created by the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda, including payment by results, changes to the probation service and continuing budget cuts to all prisons. In addition, a review of the women's estate, looking at all aspects of women's prisons and Mother and Baby Units is being carried out which may lead to significant changes in both of these areas. There are also changes occurring in health care; Prison Healthcare will be centralised in the new health commissioning system under the National Commissioning Board and local healthcare services will be commissioned by new Clinical Commissioning Groups. Alongside this, there are many changes occurring within the benefits system which are likely to lead to increasing numbers of women experiencing extreme poverty.

Where we want to be by 2016

Taking account of our current position and these changes, we have identified the following aims for Birth Companions over the coming three years.

By 2016 we want to provide our specialist support to an increased number of the most vulnerable pregnant women and new mothers in prison and the community.



To do this we will:

- Continue to support women in HMP Holloway during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood.
- Actively explore opportunities to support women in other prisons.
- Continue to deliver support to the most vulnerable women in the community during pregnancy, birth and early motherhood, including via our partnership with the Whittington Hospital.
- Replicate our current partnership with the Whittington Hospital with at least one other London hospital.
- Review, clarify and map which groups constitute the most vulnerable women.
- Ensure our services are targeting women with the most complex needs, through clear, strong partnership-working with referring agencies.
- Explore options for training others who come into contact with vulnerable women to ensure they are sensitive to, and therefore responsive to, their needs.

"Birth Companions was very helpful and supportive and very understanding. May God bless every single one of you. You all are my guardian angels."

By 2016 we want to ensure that the needs of pregnant women and new mothers and the work of Birth Companions is recognised across the changing landscape of the criminal justice sector and new health commissioning structures.

To do this we will:

- Respond flexibly to changes so as to support women wherever they may be, including in prison, on bail, or serving community sentences.
- Raise awareness of our work and build relationships with agencies that are in contact with women including probation staff, prison officers, midwives and private companies operating in the criminal justice field.
- Explore opportunities for supporting women who engage with mentoring and through-the-gate services.
- Contribute to relevant reviews and consultations, ensuring that the needs of pregnant women and new mothers are represented.
- Explore opportunities to work with the National Commissioning Board and support them to commission appropriate services for this group of women in prison.
- Develop a relationship with the new health commissioning structures in Islington including Health Watch and the Health and Wellbeing Board in order to improve services available to vulnerable women during the perinatal period.



By 2016 we will have established Birth Companions as an expert voice regarding the needs of vulnerable pregnant women and new mothers.



To do this we will:

- Carry out research into the long-term impact of our community support and disseminate this information to influence the provision of services to this group of women.
- Develop and promote a Birth Charter highlighting key areas for pregnant women and new mothers in prison.
- Develop guidelines of good practice for supporting vulnerable pregnant women and new mothers in the community.
- Deliver training to appropriate agencies regarding the needs of vulnerable pregnant women and new mothers in prison and the community.
- Continue to develop our programme of service user involvement so as to ensure our voice is informed by the views and experiences of the women we support and that women are empowered to articulate their own views and needs.
- Monitor and evaluate the services we provide to ensure they feed into an evidence base for 'what works'.
- Seek appropriate media opportunities to promote the work we do and the needs of the women we support.

By 2016 we will have further developed Birth Companions' organisational strength, sustainability and resilience.

To do this we will:

- Further articulate, share and protect our values and ethos.
- Develop the support, training and opportunities available to our volunteers and staff.
- Diversify and strengthen our funding base.
- Raise our profile.
- Ensure we continue to meet our legal obligations.





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