



Celebrating 30 years of Birth Companions

In 2026, Birth Companions marks 30 years of standing alongside pregnant women and mothers through some of the most difficult and complex situations imaginable.

This timeline traces key milestones, from our beginnings right through to today. It shows our evolution from a small band of volunteers in 1996 to a leading national voice on care, equity and justice in pregnancy and early motherhood, and demonstrates the real world impacts of our work to change policy and practice.



## A moment of national outrage

Birth Companions is founded in response to Channel 4's undercover filming showing a woman being handcuffed during labour. The footage sparks widespread public outrage and exposes the treatment of pregnant women in prison.

### 1996

## March

### Founding

A group of birth workers begin supporting pregnant women and new mothers in Holloway Prison, including setting up a 24/7 birth line, so women can call for birth support. Originally known as the Holloway Doula Group, they soon become Birth Companions. This direct response to injustice lays the foundations for Birth Companions' services in prisons and our trauma-informed, compassionate model of care.

## Volunteer training

As the charity grows, volunteer training becomes more structured. Volunteers attend induction days on ethos and practice, alongside specialist sessions with leading birth educators such as Penny Simpkin and discussions with patron Sheila Kitzinger. A Birth Companions Handbook supports volunteers and lays the foundations for the formal training that follows.

### 2000s

## Building specialist support

Birth Companions expands beyond HMP Holloway, developing specialist expertise in supporting pregnant women and mothers facing poverty, trauma, domestic abuse, and immigration insecurity.

It also starts supporting some women after release from prison once they return to the community. This is an early step towards future community services.

## Early 2000s

## Birth Companions becomes a charity

Birth Companions registers as a charity, enabling the organisation to grow its work, secure funding, build partnerships and expand specialist support for pregnant women and new mothers facing severe disadvantage.

### 2007

## 2010

## Women facing trafficking

The Helen Bamber Foundation approaches Birth Companions to support a woman who has been trafficked. This highlights that many women outside prison face similarly complex challenges and strengthens the charity's commitment to supporting women experiencing severe disadvantage wherever they are.

## 2011

## Community Link

Birth Companions expands its remit through the Community Link project. Its constitution is amended to include women "at risk of incarceration", recognising the strong links between social disadvantage, criminalisation and poor maternity experiences.

## 2014

### January

## Birth Companions begins work at HMP Peterborough

Birth Companions launches services at HMP Peterborough in partnership with a doula and the prison midwife who had developed plans to provide birth support for women in prison and women with complex needs in the surrounding community.

### June

## Service established at HMP Bronzefield

Services start at HMP Bronzefield, based on the model developed at HMP Holloway. The programme includes group sessions, one-to-one support during pregnancy, birth support, and postnatal help for women on the Mother and Baby Unit and women whose babies are in the community.

### 2016

### March

## The Birth Charter for pregnant women in prison

Birth Companions launches the Birth Charter for pregnant women in prison, setting out clear standards for safe, compassionate and rights-based maternity care in prison. Written in partnership with women with lived experience, the principles set out in the Charter led to the creation of His Majesty's Prisons and Probation Services' Policy Framework covering pregnancy, birth, Mother and Baby Units and maternal separation from a child up to the age of two years old. It also helped drive £5 million of investment in perinatal mental health pathways, greater focus on pregnancy and early motherhood in prison inspections, and a new NHS National Service Specification for maternity care in detained settings.

[Read about the Birth Charter for pregnant women in prison](#)

### July

## Closure of HMP Holloway

HMP Holloway closes, marking a defining moment for Birth Companions after 20 years of work in the prison. Birth Companions had already begun expanding its work beyond Holloway, including establishing services in other prisons, reflecting the changing landscape of supporting women in the criminal justice system.

## Lottery funding

Birth Companions receives National Lottery Funding to establish and grow lived experience engagement work across the organisation.

### 2017

### May

## Peer supporter training

Peer supporter training is launched as part of the lived experience engagement programme. Eight women previously supported by Birth Companions take part in three core training days, preparing to support other mothers through community groups and at HMP Bronzefield.

### 2018

## The Lived Experience Team

The Lived Experience Team is created, putting the voices of women with lived experience of inequity and disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood at the very centre of Birth Companions' work. With the help of Lottery funding, the team builds organically, developing ways to centre lived experience safely and meaningfully. The first meeting in February included nine women. By 2024 there were over 50 women involved.

[Read about the Lived Experience Team](#)

## Expanding support to prisons without MBUs

Birth Companions receives an HMPPS Innovation Grant to deliver specialist perinatal support in two prisons without Mother and Baby Units: HMP Foston Hall and HMP Low Newton. The project highlights the needs of women whose babies are cared for in the community.

### 2020-2022

## Pandemic

Covid-19 transforms service delivery. With prisons in lockdown, Birth Companions moves rapidly to in-cell support, strengthens partnerships, and develops a national service for pregnant women and new mothers being released during the pandemic. These changes ensure continuity of support and lead to more flexible, individualised models. Online working also expands participation and influence within the Lived Experience Team.

### 2020-2023

## Systems change

Birth Companions deepens its whole-systems approach, strengthening partnerships across health, social care, justice and the voluntary sector. Its work to influence systems change through policy, research, campaigns, public affairs, law and the media grows significantly.

### 2023

### July

## The Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care

Birth Companions launches its Birth Charter for women with involvement from children's social care, which sets out how services and systems in England should support all women involved with children's social care from conception to their child's second birthday – the period known as the 'first 1001 days'.

[Read about the Birth Charter CSC](#)

### 2022

## Consultancy

Birth Companions starts to share its trauma-informed approach to lived experience engagement through a consultancy with Women's Centre Cornwall. The charity continues to respond to growing demand from organisations seeking to learn from its model.

### 2023

### September

## Influencing sentencing guidelines

Birth Companions works with the Sentencing Council to include pregnancy and early motherhood as mitigating factors in sentencing guidelines. These changes influence wider policy, including the Sentencing Review in 2024/2025, and prompt ministerial recognition of the need to keep pregnant women and mothers of young children out of prison.

[Read about Sentencing Council guidelines](#)

[Read about the Sentencing Review](#)

### 2024

## Reproductive justice and the climate crisis

With partners Wen (Women's Environmental Network), Birth Companions publishes a report exploring the implications of the climate and biodiversity emergency for reproductive justice in the UK. It features a foreword by Dr Raneve Thakar, President of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

[Explore the report](#)

## Izzy Project launches in Hackney

The Izzy Project launches in Hackney, offering specialist, relationship-led support to women at risk of separation from their baby. Co-designed with 40 stakeholders across Hackney and the Lived Experience Team, it is named in memory of a child whose mother has been closely involved in Birth Companions' work.

[Read about the Izzy Project](#)

### 2024-2025

## Mothers seeking sanctuary

Birth Companions begins work to influence policy for migrant women during the first 1001 days, publishing a paper on barriers to reproductive justice for women seeking sanctuary in the UK. The Safer Start programme launches alongside this, developed and delivered with mothers with lived experience of the asylum system, to explore policy priorities for pregnant women, mothers and babies seeking sanctuary. Lived Experience Team members also take advisory roles in several research projects on maternity care and no recourse to public funds.

### 2025

### February



## Lost Mothers

The play 'Scenes from Lost Mothers' by theatre company Clean Break, is shaped by research by the University of Hertfordshire and members of the Birth Companions Lived Experience Team. It brings stories of motherhood, loss and separation into cultural spaces, amplifying calls to end the imprisoning of pregnant women and mothers of infants.

### 2025

## National Integrated Care Framework

Birth Companions begins work to lead the co-design of a national framework to deliver consistent, compassionate and coordinated support for women who have children's social care involvement in the first 1001 days.

### 2025

### April

## Trauma-informed training

Training is created to share Birth Companions' trauma-informed model of lived experience engagement with organisations from the voluntary, public and academic sectors.

[Read about the training](#)

### 2025

### July



## Research

Birth Companions publishes research with Kings College London and Oxford, showing that a third of women who die during or within a year of pregnancy are known to children's social care. The findings strengthen calls for coordinated national policy and joined-up care.

[Read the research](#)

### 2025

### September

## The Birth Companions Institute

The Birth Companions Institute is launched as a centre of expertise working to achieve better care, equity and justice for pregnant women, mothers and their babies, taking the charity's influencing work to the next level.

[Explore The Birth Companions Institute](#)

### 2025

### November

## Advisory Board

A Lived Experience Advisory Board is established to shape Birth Companions' governance and recruit more lived experience trustees. The charity commits to having 50% lived experience trustees and a Co-Chair and Co-Deputy Chair with lived experience by 2030.

### 2025

### October

## Ambassadors

Birth Companions establishes its Ambassador programme, welcoming doctor and activist Dr. Annabel Sowemimo, midwife and author Leah Hazard and writer for stage and radio Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti to champion its work.

### 2026

### January

## Legacy and leadership

After 30 years of leadership, Denise Marshall, a founder of Birth Companions and its Director of Services, retires. Tanya Tracey, previously Criminal Justice Services Manager, is appointed as Director of Services.

## Sentencing Bill

The Sentencing Bill receives Royal Assent, marking a significant moment in Birth Companions' long campaign to end the imprisonment of pregnant women and mothers of infants. This could help deliver the reduction in the female prison population the charity has been working towards for so long.

### 2026

### March

## 30th anniversary

Birth Companions celebrates 30 years of learning, impact and advocacy.

This coincides with a Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigation into the use of restraints on pregnant women in custody, echoing the 1996 scandal that led to the charity's founding.

### 2025-2030

Birth Companions publishes its new five year strategic plan, outlining its mission to achieve equity and justice for pregnant women, mothers and babies. This requires a radical transformation in their care. We'll know we have achieved equity and justice when:

- All women have the best possible experience of pregnancy, birth and motherhood, whatever their circumstances
- Each woman attains the best possible health and wellbeing outcomes for herself and her children
- Law, policy, systems, services and guidance meet the needs of every woman and baby