

Better care, equity and
justice for pregnant women,
mothers and babies

2025 –
2026

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A note on language

We use the words 'woman' and 'mother' throughout this Impact Report. We recognise that not everyone who is pregnant or has recently given birth identifies as a woman or mother. Our services welcome, and our wider commentary includes, anyone who is pregnant or has recently given birth, whatever their gender identity or how they express this.

Introducing Birth Companions

01

Birth Companions is a national charity supporting women having their babies in very difficult and complex situations.

These include mothers in prison; mothers with insecure immigration status; and mothers who have involvement from children's social care. Their lives are often shaped by deep-rooted, structural factors such as sexism, racism and poverty. These women and their children experience enormous challenges, but often they are not given the support they need, and are treated unfairly. This results in poor outcomes for mothers, and long-term problems for their children.

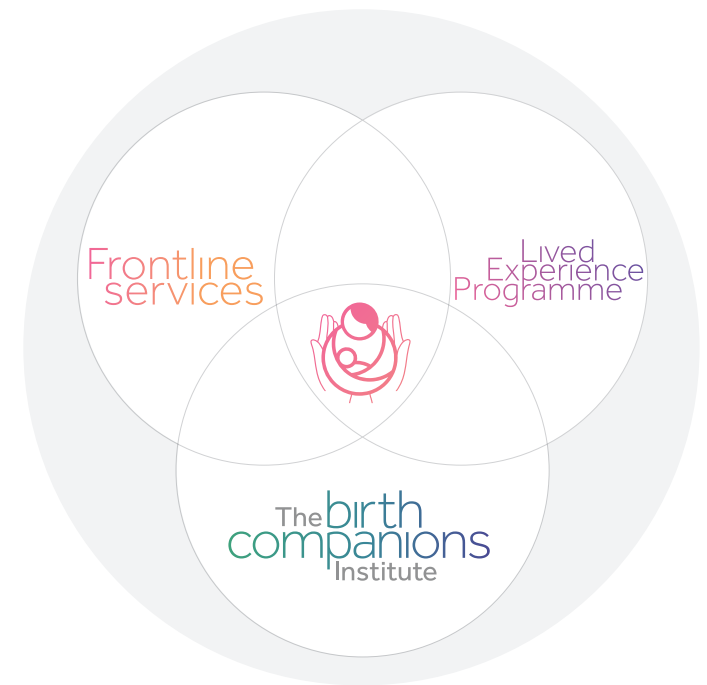
At Birth Companions, we deliver specialist services to improve women's lives in the here and now. We make sure there's evidence of what's going wrong and how to make things right. We work with partners to shape national law, policy and guidance; improve the care given by statutory services and systems; and ensure women's rights are upheld.

We do this through Birth Companions' three interlinked areas of work:

Our specialist support services provide support to women and babies, and help us understand what's happening on the ground.

Our lived experience programme centres and develops the expertise and power of women who have faced severe disadvantage during pregnancy and motherhood.

Our Birth Companions Institute works to achieve better care, equity and justice for pregnant women, mothers and babies through research, public affairs, policy, campaigns, consultancy, the law and the media.



Increasing numbers of pregnant women, mothers and babies experience severe disadvantage in the UK today. Birth Companions is the only national charity dedicated to improving these women's lives, protecting their rights, and driving better care for them and their children.

Evidence shows that what happens in the first 1001 days, from conception to a child's second birthday, lays the foundations for the rest of their life. For thousands of mothers in the UK, the challenges they face during this period create huge risks to their own health and wellbeing, and the life chances of their babies.

Birth Companions' mission is to achieve equity and justice for these 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

From our successes so far, we know this transformation is possible if we're courageous, compassionate, angry, hopeful and clever. In the next phase of our mission journey, we will build on what we've learnt, with some significant new developments.

Birth Companions 2030

This year, we published our new strategy. Birth Companions 2030 describes what we aim to accomplish over the coming years, and how. During this time, we will work closely with partners, collaborators and supporters.

Together, we'll create hope for every mother and baby, whatever their circumstances.

Read [**Birth Companions 2030**](#)

Our year in numbers

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A year of support,
collaboration and change.



**Direct
support**

39

baby boxes
provided
to women

295

women and birthing
people supported
through our services



18

new volunteers
trained

4

new staff
members



**People and
community**

28

partnerships and
collaborations

3

new
ambassadors



**Resources and
sustainability**

£105k

donations
received

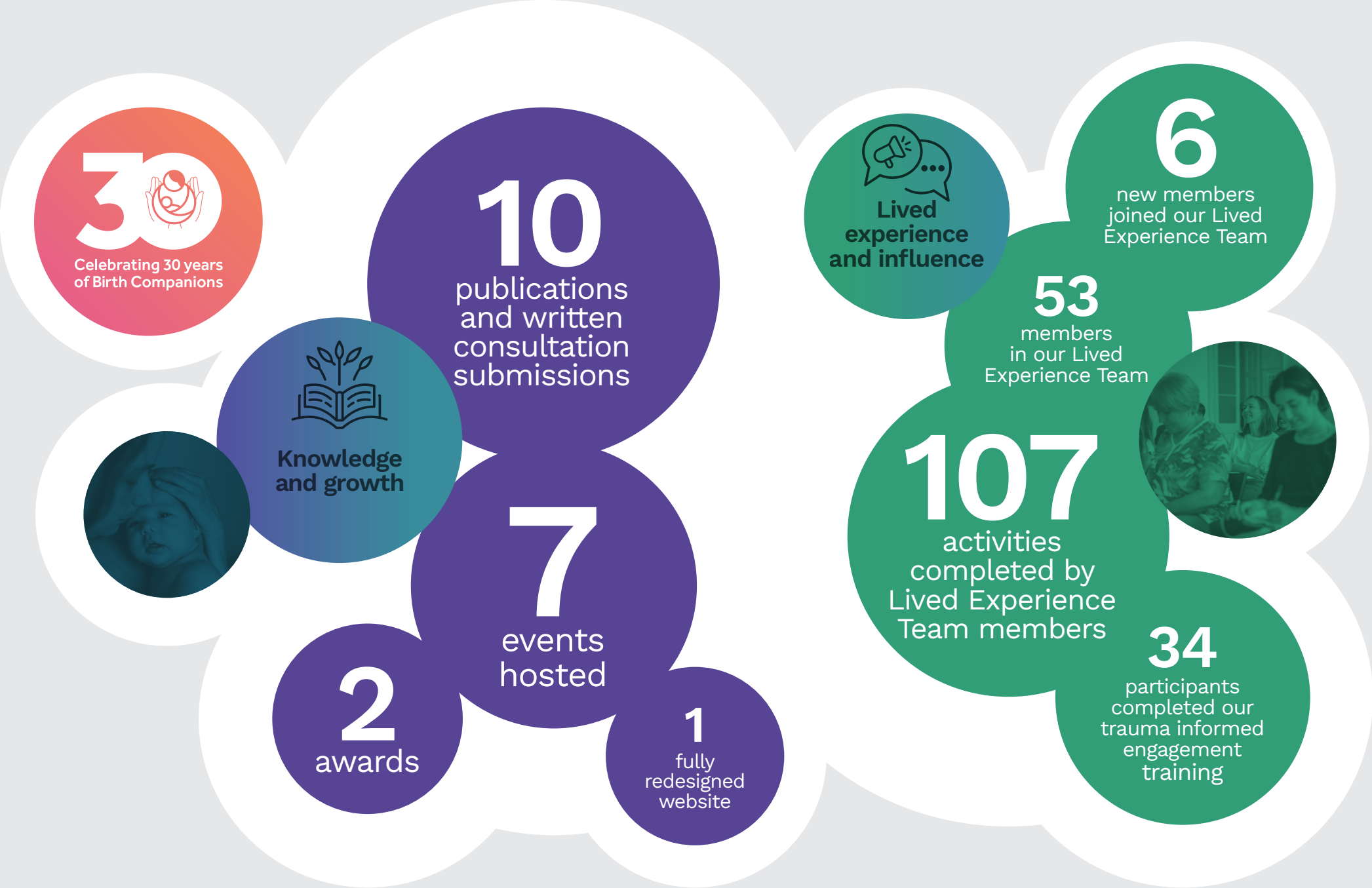


£784k

grant funding
received

£1.23m

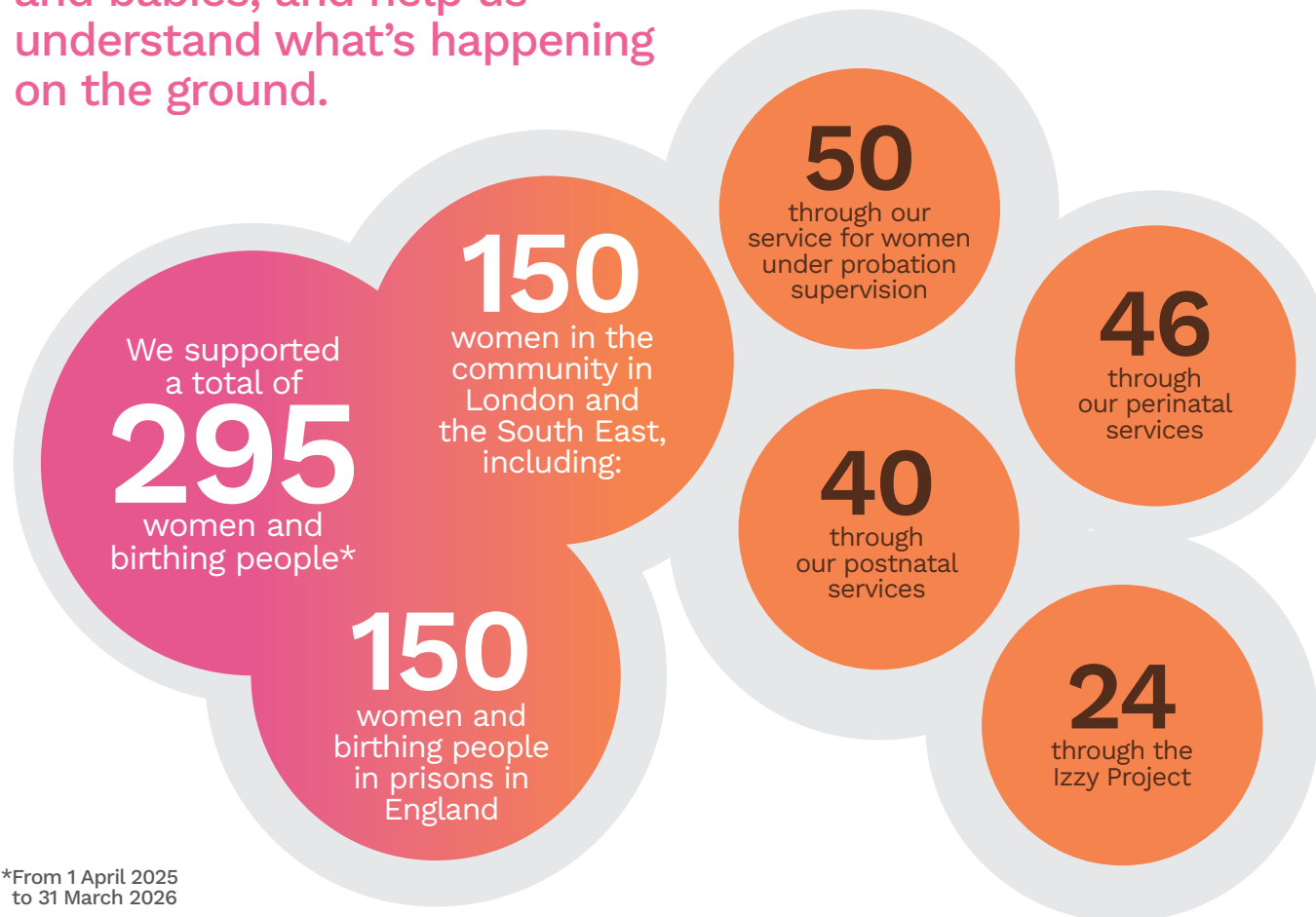
overall income



Who we supported in 2025–2026

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Our specialist services provide support to women and babies, and help us understand what's happening on the ground.

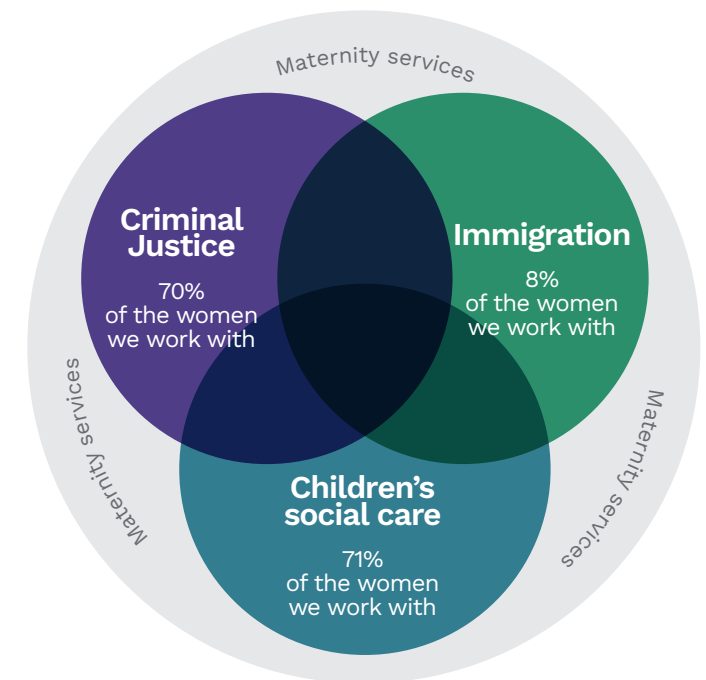


*From 1 April 2025
to 31 March 2026

70% of the women we supported had involvement with the criminal justice system

71% of the women we supported had involvement from children's social care

8% of the women we supported had current or recent experience with the immigration system



Gathering data from women on the specifics of their situations in a prescriptive way can undermine relationships.

For that reason, we avoid systematic data collection with the women we support; instead, our staff work to build trusting and strong relationships with women over time, and are led by them on the issues they want to discuss. Women tell us what they choose to about themselves and their situations, when they choose to disclose it. When specific experiences are shared with our staff and volunteers, they are recorded on our system to allow us to build a picture of needs and challenges among the women we support. This approach to mapping the needs of women across our services means that our data are non-comparative, and likely to under-represent the true extent of the disadvantage and inequity that women are experiencing. Nevertheless, we believe it is helpful to reflect on the needs that we are able to map.

Health and social factors

Financial difficulty	55%
Housing issues	42%
Mental health issues	60%
Substance use	37%
Separation from their baby	36%
Physical disability	6%
Domestic abuse	33%
Learning disability	8%
Lone parent	36%
Language issues	8%
Literacy issues	11%
ADHD diagnosis	10%
Autism diagnosis	7%

Contact with systems

Children's social care involvement	71%
Adult social care involvement	5%
Care experience	14%
Previous removal of child	43%
Criminal justice involvement	70%
Immigration issues	8%
Trafficking or modern slavery	2%

The impact of our support

Of the women who provided us with feedback this year...



“I am so incredibly grateful to have had a birth companion. She made me feel at ease and made sure I had everything I needed. She made me feel human and not alone.”

“You gave me confidence. I felt so loved through labour time.”

“When I first attended as a new mum I felt I was quite anxious. Now I feel like an experienced and good mum!”

“Birth Companions is the best service, that gives me hope and makes me feel like I’ll survive.”

The work of our Lived Experience Programme

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Our Lived Experience Programme centres and develops the expertise and power of women who have faced severe disadvantage during pregnancy and early motherhood.

Our Lived Experience Team (LET) has been running since 2018, with women regularly contributing their expertise to projects within and outside of Birth Companions, but in 2025/26 we took this area of our work to the next level.

Induction programme

This year, we launched our new induction programme, welcoming six new members to our growing LET through two dedicated sessions. We introduced them to the organisation, our values, and the opportunities available for them to drive change for mothers and babies. These new members brought the team to a total of fifty-three members.

Raising voices, raising expectations

As lived experience engagement work becomes more widespread across the voluntary, public, and academic sectors, we want to raise expectations around how this work can be done well, share what we have learned and support the development of good practice. This year we published [Raising voices, raising expectations](#), our new trauma informed engagement model, and launched our two and a half hour [online interactive training](#), co-designed with members of our LET to help researchers and practitioners explore the core values of the trauma-informed approach, develop an understanding of our engagement model, and support others to develop their own safe, meaningful and trauma-informed engagement work. Thirty-four participants, working in a wide variety of sectors including academia, local government and the voluntary sector, have completed this training to date. Participants have told us that they feel better equipped to undertake trauma-informed engagement within their own work, and

commented on the value of such training being co-delivered by women with extensive experience of lived experience engagement work.

“Best inclusive training I’ve been to in a long time. The sector is lucky to have you all!”

Participant in November 2025 training

“It was useful to hear from Lived Experience Team members, particularly as their perspectives often differed and were a fantastic example about how flexible and reactive you should be when working with people who have lived experience of traumatic events.”

Participant in November 2025 training

“This course offered me a framework which I can incorporate into my approach and work.”

Participant in March 2025 training

The work of our Lived Experience Programme continued

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Governance

In our new strategy Birth Companions 2030, we committed to increasing lived experience representation and power in Birth Companions. By 2030 we plan to have a Co-Chair and Deputy Co-Chair with lived experience, and 50% lived experience representation among our board members. This year we formed a lived experience advisory board to help shape this work, providing a route through which to recruit new trustees with lived experience, and support the existing board to welcome new members with lived experience more effectively.

Engagement with our Lived Experience Team

In 2025/26, members of Birth Companions LET took part in twenty-two distinct projects, including advisory board roles on major academic research projects; interviews with print and broadcast media; service co-design work; speaking engagements at conferences; webinars and parliamentary roundtables; training delivery; contributions to book chapters and journal articles; artistic outputs; and much, much more. Here we spotlight just two of our most collaborative and impactful projects from 2025/26.

Giving HOPE

Co-designed by women with lived experience, HOPE Boxes are a therapeutic cross-agency offer supporting mothers and babies separated close to birth due to safeguarding concerns, with carefully chosen items that aid connection, comfort, and trauma reduction. Beyond impact for individual women and babies, HOPE Boxes drive system change by bringing together disparate systems and professions to encourage multiagency working – and are now embedded across sixty health and children's social care partnerships in England. This year, the project won a prestigious Stephen Lloyd Award, given to projects with potential for practical, positive, and sustainable societal impact, and work is now underway to adapt HOPE Boxes for adopters and adoptees, prisons, and family assessment centres.

[Find out more](#)

The Lost Mothers Project

Co-designed from the outset with Birth Companions' LET, the Lost Mothers Project was a four-year, ESRC-funded study led by Dr Laura Abbott (University of Hertfordshire) into mothers separated from their babies in prison. Its findings reached audiences far beyond the original research: the final report and a [Birth Companions policy Spotlight report](#) launched together at the British Library, while Scenes from Lost Mothers — a play by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti drawing on the project's findings — toured the country in 2025, bringing the realities of maternal separation in prisons to diverse audiences in an immediate, human format. Its parliamentary performance saw LET members in the room for the post-show discussion, centring the women behind the research as drivers of change. In December 2025, the project won the Research Excellence Award at the Criminal Justice Alliance Awards.

[Find out more](#)

LET perspective: Co-designing a National Integrated Care Framework

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In 2025/26, Birth Companions began leading a co-design process with women with lived experience of infant care proceedings, academics, and policy and practice leaders from across social care, health, family justice and beyond, to develop a new National Integrated Care Framework for women with children's social care involvement during the first 1001 days. Here Nlanda, a member of our Lived Experience Team, reflects on what it is like being part of this collaborative project.



“

Being part of this work with Birth Companions has been a deeply meaningful experience. For many women and families involved with children's social care during pregnancy and the first two years of a child's life, systems can feel fragmented, overwhelming, and isolating. When you've lived through that experience, it can feel like no one is really advocating for you, and that your voice doesn't matter.

That's why being part of the co-design community has been so surprising and inspiring. Coming into meetings with professionals and other members with lived and learned experience, I've seen that people genuinely care. Everyone brings different

expertise and insights, and it's that diversity which ensures that nothing is missed. Where one person might not spot a certain challenge, another is able to highlight it, ensuring that women, babies, and families – especially those who are less visible or face complex circumstances – are seen and supported. Witnessing that level of commitment and consideration has genuinely moved me during my time on this hugely important project.

”

LET perspective: Co-designing a National Integrated Care Framework

continued



The right people in the room

The work itself is large and complex. There are many layers to connect, multiple agencies involved, and a lot of things to consider in order to deliver consistent, coordinated, and compassionate support. At times it can feel daunting. But the right people are in the room, people are committed to doing the hard work, listening, and shaping a framework that will truly improve outcomes for families. The conversations aren't always simple, but the dedication of everyone involved shows that the framework will be meaningful in practice, not just on paper. What has stood out to me is how different this feels from what many women and families have experienced before. Often, systems are built without those who have lived through them, which means important realities are missed; especially for those facing more complex or less visible challenges

What 'Lived Experience' means in practice

In one of the meetings, I remember a conversation about continuity of care. From a professional perspective, it can sometimes be seen as difficult to maintain, often due to pressures like limited funding or understaffing and therefore not always prioritised. But someone with lived experience shared how, in reality and in

practice, not having that continuity can lead to disengagement. Having to repeat your story again and again, rebuilding trust, and feeling uncertain can be exhausting and at times re-traumatising

For women from more adverse or marginalised backgrounds, this can then be misunderstood and translated as not engaging or not working well with services, when actually they are understandably overwhelmed

We have also spoken about how simple things can make a real difference – like being clearly told when care is changing, when there will be a handover, or when support is ending ahead of time. Without that clarity, women and families can be left feeling uncertain or even uncared for, even when that isn't the intention

What stood out to me was that some of these changes don't necessarily require more funding, but a shift in awareness, practice and exposure to these lived perspectives. The room paused, really listened, and the conversation changed to how to effectively integrate the lived perspective. Those moments stayed with me, because it showed how powerful it is when lived experience isn't just heard, but actively shapes the work

Systems change

On a personal level, being part of this process has changed how I see system change. It suddenly seems possible. Instead of experiencing decisions happening to women and families, I've seen how decisions can be shaped with them involved. Lived experience is valued, voices are heard, and solutions are built collaboratively. I also recognise that the absence of lived experience input in the past may be part of why current frameworks have sometimes fallen short in their consideration and care for families. It's clear that in the National Integrated Care Framework, it isn't just talk – action is happening, and the framework is being designed to work for real people.

I believe the National Integrated Care Framework will provide women, babies, and families with care that is coordinated, compassionate, and consistent across agencies. With the expertise, insight, and commitment gathered through this co-design process, I can be confident that this framework will deliver change, making the experience of care more supportive, consistent, and effective for families who need it most.



The work of our Birth Companions Institute

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Launched in September 2025, our Birth Companions Institute works to achieve better care, equity and justice for pregnant women, mothers and babies through research, public affairs, policy, campaigns, consultancy, the law and the media.

Together, we:

- Inform, shape and change policy, legislation and guidance
- Build and share evidence on disadvantage and inequity in the first 1001 days from conception to a child's second birthday
- Lead the way in trauma-informed engagement with women with lived experience
- Co-design systems and services
- Challenge injustice and change legal structures and practice
- Work with the media to reshape narratives on disadvantage and inequity in pregnancy and early motherhood



In the 10 months since we launched the Birth Companions Institute, we have been working on a wide range of projects, campaigns and partnerships. Here we spotlight two of our major programmes.

The work of our Birth Companions Institute continued

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1001 Days in the Criminal Justice System

**1001 days
in the CJS**



A better approach to pregnancy and early motherhood in criminal justice

Our coordinated programme of criminal justice work aims to achieve an ambitious new approach to pregnancy, birth and early motherhood across the whole criminal justice system. In 2025/26, we were able to drive important shifts in the policy landscape. Thanks to the relentless focus of this programme, the Independent Review of Sentencing, the Sentencing Act and the recommendations of the Women's Justice Board all made explicit reference to the specific needs of pregnant women, mothers and babies.

While we continue to push for an end to the imprisonment of pregnant women and mothers of infants, this programme is also focused on work to ensure all parts of the wider system – probation, policing, and the courts – are part of a radical rethink on how women experience criminal justice contact in pregnancy and early motherhood, along with addressing the drivers of women's criminalisation, which lie in experiences of poverty, abuse, trauma, racism, housing issues and more.

[Find out more](#)

“I am particularly keen to ensure that pregnant women and mothers of young children are not anywhere near our female prison estate in future.”

Shabana Mahmood, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, as part of the Independent Sentencing Review debate in the Commons, May 2025

Recommendation 11:
Legislate to end imprisonment of pregnant women in all but the most exceptional cases.

Recommendation 12:
Promote non-custodial sentencing of mothers of children under 18 through directions and awareness raising with sentencers.

Recommendation 13 (c):
Introduce a probation policy framework to mirror that used in prisons for women and babies in the first 1001 days, guiding supervision, licence conditions and community order requirements, bail and recall decisions. [Birth Companions are developing a First 1001 Days Impact Tool for publication in 2026 which will assist.]

Women's Justice Board recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment, March 2026

The work of our Birth Companions Institute continued

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A national integrated care framework for women and babies with children's social care involvement in the first 1001 days

Since June 2025, the Birth Companions Institute has been working with experts with lived, learned and professional experience to co-design a new approach to supporting pregnant women, mothers and babies where there is involvement from children's social care. We built a National Advisory Group including women with lived experience of infant care proceedings, academics, and policy and practice leaders from across social care, health, family justice and beyond. Alongside this group, we created an extensive co-design community, made up of practice professionals and women with lived experience from around the country, incorporating expertise on housing, domestic abuse, substance use, and criminal justice. This diversity of voices has been essential in shaping the work, which has attracted huge interest. The national call for evidence held in the summer of 2025 received over 120 submissions, and we're extremely grateful to all who have contributed their time and insight. The new Framework will be published early in 2027.

[Find out more](#)

“This is probably the most important piece work of my nearly 40-year career”

A health service member of the Framework co-design community

“The work that you are doing is making a huge change to practice, especially in the pre-birth and postnatal periods.”

A social care leader reflecting on development of the Framework

Celebrating 30 years of Birth Companions in 2026

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

Birth Companions was founded in March 1996 to support pregnant women and new mothers in the harsh environment of Holloway Prison.

We have seen what is possible when women are listened to, heard and take power into their own hands.

We continue to see where systems fail, and why change remains urgent.

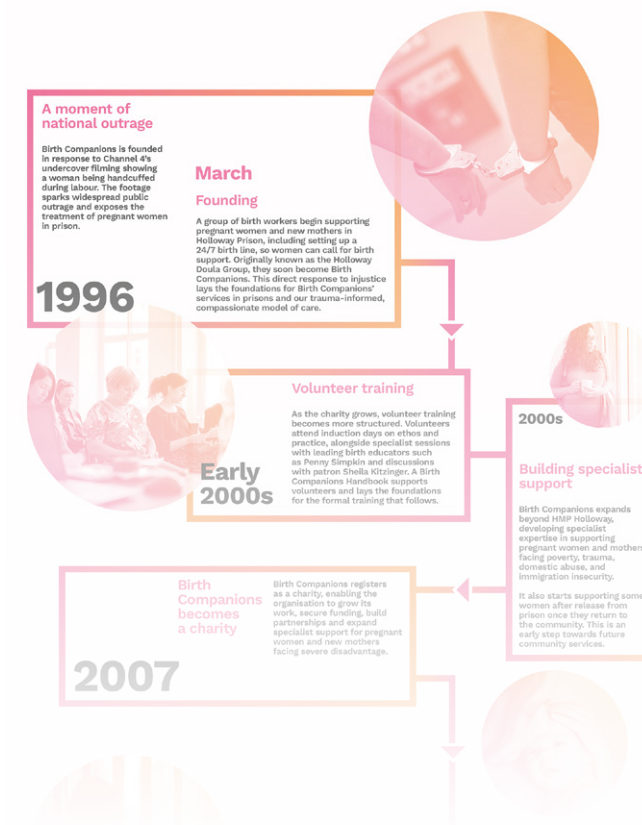
Our 30th year is a moment to reflect on what change looks like when women are met with kindness, compassion and understanding. It is also a time to recommit to the work that still needs to be done to deliver better care, equity and justice for all pregnant women, mothers and babies.

[Find out more](#) about our plans for this special year.



Celebrating 30 years of Birth Companions

Milestones



[View our full milestones timeline](#)

Our ambassadors

This year, Birth Companions welcomed three new ambassadors



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Dr Annabel Sowemimo

Doctor, academic, activist and writer

Annabel is an NHS Consultant in Sexual & Reproductive Health working in South London, and the founder of the award-winning Reproductive Justice Initiative which works to address health inequalities and racial disparities. She is also a Harold Moody Scholar and PhD candidate at King's College London, researching the experiences of Black women in Britain with fertility control methods. Her first book, *Divided: Racism, Medicine and Why We Need to Decolonise Healthcare*, won multiple awards.



Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti

Writer for stage, screen and radio

Gurpreet is a playwright with an extensive list of credits and many prizes to her name. In her role as a core writer on Radio Four's *The Archers*, Gurpreet was part of the team behind the ground-breaking story of Helen entering prison while pregnant. Gurpreet also worked with *Clean Break*, *Birth Companions* and the *Lost Mothers Project* to create and tour her hit play *Scenes from Lost Mothers*, exploring the experiences of women facing separation from their babies due to imprisonment.



Leah Hazard

Midwife, author and women's health advocate

Leah has worked across a range of clinical settings as an NHS Scotland midwife, welcoming hundreds of babies and helping many more families on their journeys. Leah has published two bestselling books, and is currently working on a third – which Birth Companions is delighted to have been able to contribute to. Leah is also a trustee of Scottish charity Amma Birth Companions and a frequent commentator on women's health across print and broadcast media.

Birth Companions would like to thank all the wonderful partners we worked with this year, on a wide range of projects aimed at driving change for pregnant women, mothers and babies facing inequity and disadvantage:

4PB
Advance
Centre for Child and Family Justice Research
at Lancaster University
Centre for Crime and Justice Studies
Clean Break
Clinks
Doughty Street Chambers
End Remand for Women Collective
For Baby's Sake Trust
Giving HOPE
Happy Baby Community
King's College London
Lancaster University
Maternal Mental Health Alliance

Maternity Consortium
MSB
National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit
at the University of Oxford
National Women's Justice Coalition
Newcastle University
Nuffield Family Justice Observatory
National Youth Advocacy Service
Parent-Infant Foundation
Practice Plus Group
Pram Depot
Pregnancy & Baby Charities Network
Research in Practice
University of Hertfordshire
Women's Environmental Network

Thank you also to our funders, without whom none of our work to achieve better care, equity and justice for pregnant women, mothers and babies would be possible:

Arsenal Foundation
Bromley Trust
Brown Dog
City Bridge Foundation
Crucible Foundation
Evan Cornish Foundation
The Firebird Collective
Smedvig AS
Henry Smith Foundation
Hollick Foundation
Impact London Collective

Impact on Urban Health
KPMG Foundation
London Borough of Hackney
Ministry of Justice
National Lottery Community Fund
NHS North East London ICB
PramDepot
Rayne Foundation
The Rupert and Elizabeth Nabarro
Charitable Trust
Segelman Trust

And thank you to the large number of generous individuals who supported our work through donations and by taking part in fundraising events. Your donations, no matter how small, make a real difference to the women and babies we support.