

PRESS RELEASE

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New report spotlights how housing problems jeopardise women's rights to safe maternity care

A report published today (18 June) by the charities Birth Companions and Birthrights highlights the need for a more proactive, integrated approach to addressing the maternity care needs of women experiencing multiple disadvantages during pregnancy and early motherhood.

Through in-depth interviews with women and professionals, the research found that, in almost every case, problems with housing acted as a major barrier to women's legal rights to safe, appropriate and dignified maternity care. The resulting report - 'Holding it all together' - explores these and a range of other rights issues experienced by the most disadvantaged women, relating to choice and consent, experiences of trauma and abuse, asylum and immigration, the value of continuity of care and specialist midwifery services, and the difficulty of navigating multiple health and social care systems.

Almost all of the women who took part in the research experienced pregnancy and early motherhood while living in temporary, insecure or unsuitable accommodation. Housing was cited as a central problem in their lives, causing and exacerbating mental health problems and jeopardising their access to care. Several participants were in housing designated as 'temporary' but had been there for months, or in some cases years. Others were moved during pregnancy or shortly after birth, disrupting relationships with maternity and broader support services, which can vary significantly between local areas.

Midwives talked of women having to stay on postnatal wards after they would normally have been discharged because they didn't have housing arranged, or having to attend the housing office while still physically and emotionally vulnerable post-birth. Other professionals spoke of supporting women who had left violent relationships, only to see them re-housed in units where domestic violence was a frequent occurrence.

Speaking ahead of the launch of 'Holding it all together', Naomi Delap, Director of Birth Companions, commented:

"This report shines a vital spotlight on many of the ways in which disadvantaged women experience poorer care and support during pregnancy and early motherhood, with significant impact on outcomes for them and their babies. But it also shows the positive impact of efforts already underway to improve things for these women through the ongoing Maternity Transformation Programme, and the new NHS long term plan. Women told us continuity of carer and more specialist service provision makes a real difference. Yet amidst all this encouraging work, the experiences shared in the research show us that the housing needs of these women and their babies seem to be largely overlooked, with direct consequences for their care."

Amy Gibbs, Chief Executive of Birthrights, said:

"Housing directly impacts on maternity care, jeopardising women's fundamental rights to safety and dignity during pregnancy and childbirth. In our research, women in temporary or transient housing struggled to access the proven benefits of continuity of carer or services based on long-term therapeutic relationships. We heard about women in unstable or inappropriate accommodation who did not have a place where they felt safe to be during early labour, or confident returning to with their newborn during the highly vulnerable postnatal period. This is a blindspot that requires urgent action across the entirety of the health, care and social support system. Human rights law demands every woman has equal access to safe, appropriate maternity care that protects her human dignity."

The charities are calling for greater attention to be given to housing issues in the context of maternity care, taking advantage of the NHS Long Term Plan's commitment to greater integration between local services. This should include:

- Integrated Care Systems need to ensure housing and other local authority services are fully embedded in their services, including active engagement of housing in the community hubs being rolled out under the Maternity Transformation Programme, Better Births.
- Housing, social care and health services should work more closely together when women facing severe and multiple disadvantage are relocated during pregnancy or in the postnatal period, to ensure smooth transfers of care.
- Local authorities should consider:
 - how housing allocation policies and prioritisation decisions reflect the needs and rights of pregnant women and their babies, including bereaved and traumatised women who do not have their babies in their care at the end of their pregnancy.
 - providing a single point of contact to professionals supporting pregnant women facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

For enquiries about the research or the issues relating to severe and multiple disadvantage in pregnancy and early motherhood, please contact Kirsty Kitchen, Head of Policy and Communications at Birth Companions, at kirsty@birthcompanions.org.uk

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About the report

'Holding it all together: understanding the rights issues experienced by women facing disadvantage during pregnancy, birth and postnatal care' was funded by Trust for London. Research was conducted during 2017-2019, in the form of 12 in-depth interviews with women who faced significant disadvantages during their perinatal journey, and interviews with 26 midwives, health visitors, family nurse practitioners and birth supporters.

The full report is available for download on both organisations' websites from 18 June, or on request from kirsty@birthcompanions.org.uk

About the charities

[Birthrights](#) is the UK's only organisation dedicated to improving women's experience of pregnancy and childbirth by promoting respect for human rights.

[Birth Companions](#) is the UK's leading voice on the needs and experiences of pregnant women and new mothers facing severe and multiple disadvantage.

The human rights context

The Human Rights Act 1998 incorporates the rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law. Human rights are also protected by common law. Human rights law demands personalised maternity care that treats women as individuals. Specifically, every woman has the right to:

- receive safe and appropriate maternity care respects her fundamental human dignity (Articles 2 and 3 of the European Convention)
- to privacy and confidentiality (Article 8)
- to make choices about her own pregnancy and childbirth, even if her caregivers do not agree with her (Article 8)
- to equality and freedom from discrimination (Article 14)

Human rights are also directly relevant to housing. For women provided with housing by statutory bodies, Article 8 rights to a private and family life may be engaged if housing is either not provided or is not suitable to the extent that it interferes with private or family life.

(See: Shelter Legal (2019). Human rights challenges:

http://england.shelter.org.uk/legal/homelessness_applications/challenging_la_decisions/human_rights_challenges#2)