

# Advocating for women in the criminal justice system



**Birth Companions and the Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance**

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A craft session at women@thewell  
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# Introduction

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The voluntary sector working in criminal justice has extensive knowledge and experience in bringing about tangible changes in the criminal justice system.

Clinks has been funded by the Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales to deliver the Stronger Voice Project – a three-year project with the aim of strengthening the voice and influence of the voluntary sector working in criminal justice through a programme of information, collaboration, training, and capacity building.

As part of this project, we are running a series of expert seminars; the below case study seeks to highlight the different approaches and strategies voluntary organisations working with in the criminal justice system take in their advocacy work. We hope that by sharing these examples organisations can develop a greater understanding of advocacy and influencing work and gain knowledge about different approaches to inform their activity.

The functions, processes, and environment of the criminal justice system have not been designed with women in mind. Voluntary organisations run by and for women have ensured that women in prison and the community receive the gender- and trauma-informed support that they should rightly be entitled to. Many of these organisations have used their frontline experience to push for systemic change at both national and regional levels for women in contact with the criminal justice system.

We would like to express our thanks to Kirsty Kitchen, head of policy and communications at Birth Companions, and Kate Fraser, manager at Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance who discussed their respective roles in advocating for women in the criminal justice system and achieving genuine and long-lasting changes to services. You can find an [online recording of this expert seminar on YouTube](#).

# Birth companions

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## About Birth Companions

Founded in 1995, Birth Companions are the leading voice on disadvantage and inequality in pregnancy, birth, and early motherhood. Their advocacy works spans the '1000 critical days' from the point of conception up to a child's second birthday, with a large focus on support for women who don't continue to be their child's primary carer for the entirety of that period. Birth Companions provide services in prisons and the community, focusing on the key systems of maternity, criminal justice, social services, and immigration. They have a lived experience team of over 40 women, most of whom have been support by the service and reflect the experiences of having contact with those systems.

## How Birth Companions' campaigning has grown

The organisation was founded amid media and parliamentary attention following the release of footage showing the restraint of a pregnant resident of HMP Holloway whilst she was in a hospital.

The attention prompted a wide debate since some considered restraint a necessary policy for security and the prevention of escape, whereas many recognised the health risks and the human rights concerns of restraining pregnant women.

The campaigning element of Birth Companions' work gradually evolved alongside its service development. Since its inception in 1996, Birth Companions' work has led to significant improvements in the care of pregnant women and mothers of infants. They are now building on these successes and bringing a similar focus to the needs and experiences of women affected by the social services and immigration systems. A chart of the organisation's influence in the criminal justice system over the last 25 years can be viewed [here](#).

## Birth Companions' strategy

### Generating policy-ready resources

In 2016, Birth Companions published *The Birth Charter*, which sets out principles and recommendations for the care of pregnant women and new mothers in prisons. It was created off the back of service delivery and developed from the insights of staff. It was designed to be 'policy friendly', meaning the principles within it could be easily lifted and used by others working in this policy area. These principles then became reference points in Public Health England's *Gender Specific Standards to Improve Health and Wellbeing for Women in Prison in England* and went on to inform HM Inspectorate of Prisons' *Women's prison Expectations* and the operational guidance for the *Female Offender Strategy*.

### **Lived experience team**

The team was developed using significant funding from the National Lottery. It evolved organically and has become much more than a valuable platform for women to share their own experiences; over the years it has become a source of huge insight and challenge for policymakers and stakeholders, developing sector-leading expertise.

### **Working with academics and researchers**

The commissioning of academic and peer-led research has helped Birth Companions to focus on problems and identify solutions which can direct the attention of policymakers, commissioners and service providers to what needs to change and how.

### **Working with parliamentary champions**

This has helped elevate the status of Birth Companions and establish the legitimacy of the organisation.

### **Selective work with the media**

Birth Companions works selectively with the media both due to the size of the organisation but also the sensitive nature of the subject matter. When opportunities have been taken to work with the media, it has been done in a way that adds value to advocacy work.

## **Example of strategy in practice**

Birth Companions has worked closely with Dr Laura Abbott, a specialist midwife who carried out her doctoral research on women in prisons. Their work generated media attention regarding a woman who had given birth in a prison cell.

Following on from this attention, Birth Companions worked with parliamentarians to table parliamentary questions.

This relationship then led to a meeting with the prisons minister at the time, which was attended by some members of Birth Companions' lived experience team.

This then allowed the organisation to be included in the development of a [major review](#) of operational policy on pregnancy, Mother and baby units and maternal separation, which developed into a whole new policy framework which considers pregnancy, pregnancy outcomes that are not birth, maternal separation, and women in mother and baby units.

Following on from the policy framework Birth Companions was approached for consultation on a terms of reference for the new HMPPS policy framework on this matter. They worked with the HMPPS Women's Team to broaden this to include pregnancy, pregnancy outcomes and maternal separation.

# The challenges related to advocacy work

## Tension between campaigning work and service delivery

There is a danger that if campaigning work is not received well this may shut the door on funding needed to deliver services. Birth Companions has now built up its legitimacy and profile ensuring this balance is managed.

## Capacity and funding

Birth Companions are a small organisation, meaning capacity is limited and finding funding to carry out influencing work can be difficult.

## Planned versus reactive opportunities

The organisation has evolved a clear focus to achieve change, however unexpected opportunities can come up which can side-line their established influencing priorities.

## Tension between local and national pictures

The organisation does not work in all areas of England and Wales, therefore service delivery insights come from specific parts of the country. However, their policy and advocacy work reflect the national criminal justice picture.

## Avoiding 'performance activism'

There is always a concern about how much change the work is generating on the ground.

## Key ingredients for success

- Close working between services on the ground and policy and advocacy work
- The centrality of lived experience
- Taking chances when they present themselves and being open to setting aside pre-existing plans
- Following up on policy threads that might have lost momentum
- Sheer perseverance.

## Looking ahead and challenges in the advocacy space

- Moving from spotlighting to scrutiny. There can be a tendency to bring attention to specific individual issues and the organisation wants to maintain an ongoing level of scrutiny across the whole system.
- Maintaining focus on the *Female Offender Strategy* and the [Concordat on women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system](#), given the government's policy focus on the male estate.
- Sentencing reform following the [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act](#).
- Ensuring the value of specialism and the role of the voluntary sector, particularly women's specialist organisations, is crucial.



# Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance

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## About the Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance

The Greater Manchester Women's Support Alliance (GMWSA) was established in 2016 by seven organisations who provide support services to women across all ten boroughs in Greater Manchester who may be vulnerable or have unmet support needs. The GMWSA came together to ensure a collective voice is heard by policy makers and commissioners of services. They have a presence in each of the ten local authority areas across Greater Manchester.

The organisation supports the Greater Manchester whole system approach through the provision of gender specific 1-2-1 and group support to women in the criminal justice system. For women at risk of offending they offer self-referrals and referrals from other organisations. At the point of arrest, individuals can be referred via the Greater Manchester Police, the Liaison and Diversion scheme and Out of Court Disposal scheme. They also provide support to women serving community orders, meaning women can see their probation officers at their local women's centre. For women leaving custody there is dedicated Through the Gate support.

## Key areas of work

### Casework support

Women can attend their women's centre to see their Probation Officer and receive core 1-1 casework support from a women's centre caseworker.

### Referral to specialist partner agencies

Where required, referrals can be made to a GMWSA specialist women's partner, who deliver their services from a women's centre.

### Women's services groupwork provision

Women can be referred to the wide range of groupwork activity run by the women's centres, according to need.

### Referrals to other local agencies or local projects

This could include physical/ mental health services, drugs and alcohol services or access to local specialist projects, which are funded locally by agencies such as the local authority.

### GMWSA Women's counselling services

Where there is a need for individual counselling, women will be referred to this service.

### **Offence-focused work**

Probation will deliver offence-focused work at women's centres. Those sessions would be counted as Rehabilitative Activity Requirement (RAR) days, as part of a sentence.

### **Local additionality**

Local additionality for each women's centre to ensure local knowledge and solutions.

## **Key ingredients for success**

### **Devolution**

Moving key commissioning from Whitehall to Greater Manchester brought greater devolution of criminal justice responsibility and budgets to local commissioners who understand the local picture.

### **Thinking differently**

Working with Probation partners who wanted to think differently and buy into collaborative work and a co-commissioning relationship with the Combined Authority.

### **Data**

The GMWSA has an abundance of data and 'know how' about getting better outcomes for women, something that was valuable and not easily available to policy makers. By bringing this forward the GMWSA were able to demonstrate not only need but also solutions.

### **Governance infrastructure**

There is a leadership group who championed the GMWSA strategically, including the chief constable and chief executives from local authorities. Finding and influencing those leaders was critical.

### **One collective voice**

We recognised that having one collective voice and the ability to deliver consistently was something Greater Manchester commissioners were very interested in. The GMWSA influenced commissioners on what core services should look like and who should be able to access them.



## Our vision

Our vision is of a vibrant, independent and resilient voluntary sector that enables people to transform their lives.

## Our mission

To support, represent and advocate for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

## Join Clinks

**Are you a voluntary organisation supporting people in the criminal justice system?**

Join our network of over 600 members.

Clinks membership offers you:

- A voice to influence change
- Practical assistance to be effective and resilient
- Support from a community of like-minded professionals.

**[www.clinks.org/membership](http://www.clinks.org/membership)**

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