

Giving HOPE and minimising trauma when mothers are separated from their baby close to birth.

Information Sheet

Background research

Research led by Lancaster University *Born into Care* series, as part of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory's special interest work on babies in the family justice system, has demonstrated that there are an increasing number of newborns issued with care proceedings in England (Broadhurst et al 2018). The mothers are typically facing multiple adversities, have histories of trauma and many were care experienced themselves. Previous research by the team at Lancaster University has also revealed the issue of 'recurrent care proceedings. Once appearing in care proceedings with one child, women have a 1 in 4 chance of returning within a seven-year period, with the greatest likelihood within 2 years with a newborn baby (Broadhurst et al 2015, 2017, 2022 forthcoming).

Findings from the recent *Born into Care* qualitative study, conducted by the Lancaster team in partnership with the Rees Centre at Oxford University, also revealed that women are often overwhelmed by the systemic practices surrounding safeguarding during pregnancy and separation at birth, which include late decision making, poor communication between agencies and with families and shortcomings in the specialist support shown to mothers (Mason et al 2022). Women also highlighted how even small changes that promote sensitive interactions and improve their sense of control and choice, may have helped to ameliorate the trauma many experienced during this time; trauma that often leads to significant emotional and psychological deterioration in the women.

Women who experience separation from their babies at birth are at acute risk of a mental health crisis, during the postnatal period (Marsh 2015, Bicknell 2021, Mason et al 2022). Despite the risks of separation to women's mental health, they lack access to well-established psychological care pathways open to other mothers who experience a birth trauma such as stillbirth or late-stage miscarriage. Impacted by these women's situations, midwives in some NHS Trusts have adapted an intervention they used for mothers of stillborn babies immediately following the death of the baby. Whilst different in their detail, each is an adaptation to their local bereavement pathway, largely centred around the creation of memory boxes for mothers and babies (see for example Not-Forgotten Boxes - Nursing Times Awards).

The HOPE Boxes Development

Building on this local area practice development and in partnership with a group of women with lived experience of separation at birth (self-named the HOPE Mums), the Lancaster University team in partnership with Birth Companions have developed “HOPE (Hold On Pain Eases) Boxes”. The HOPE Boxes are designed to help mothers capture important memories of their time with their baby prior to separation and importantly to promote the ongoing connection between them and their baby post-separation whilst court proceedings are considering the longer-term plans for the child. If the outcome of care proceedings does lead to the baby being placed permanently out of the mother’s care, the HOPE Boxes are also designed to support longer-term loss and grief work with the mother and life story and identity work with the child.

HOPE Boxes include important items to the mother and baby. For example, photographs, footprints, cot cards, and matching soft toys and blankets. Two boxes are created, one box stays with the mother and the other follows the baby into kinship care, foster care or their adoptive placement if this is the final outcome. The mother also receives a letter and a poem written by the HOPE Mums, with the aim of providing an ongoing connection to other mothers who have experienced similar forms of loss, thus mitigating feelings of stigma and shame. In the immediate aftermath of separation, these carefully chosen items will be used to ameliorate the immediate pain of separation by helping her still feel connected to her baby, aid self-care and help her hold on to her maternal identity. It is hoped that the HOPE Boxes will give recognition to their experiences and offer some comfort in a process that many mothers report as feeling dehumanising (Broadhurst and Mason 2020, Mason et al 2022).

The HOPE Boxes Pilot

Through monies from the Economic and Social Research Council and the NHS National Maternity Safeguarding Network, the HOPE Boxes will be piloted in a number of NHS Trusts between autumn 2022 and autumn 2023. Inclusion in the pilot was based on the individual Trusts’ ability to demonstrate readiness for implementation. For more information about the site readiness application process and the pilot please see the project website [Child & Family Justice Research \(cfj-lancaster.org.uk\)](https://www.childandfamilyjustice.lancaster.ac.uk/).

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