

New guidelines to improve practice when babies are separated from parents at birth

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[Draft guidelines](#) to help improve practice when the state acts to safeguard a baby at birth have been created by researchers at Oxford (the Rees Centre) and Lancaster Universities—and are being tested

across England and Wales.

When the state intervenes to safeguard a baby at or close to birth, it is traumatic for birth parents and painful for professionals. When the safeguarding action results in parent and baby separation, this can be life-changing—with many inherent and unresolved ethical and practice dilemmas.

The guidelines are being tested against a backdrop of a rising number of newborn babies being subject to care proceedings in England and Wales. Numbers have more than doubled over the last decade.

According to the report, "Much of the current local guidance has been shaped by the learning points from serious case reviews in which an infant has died or suffered serious harm as a result of abuse or neglect. Understandably, the main emphasis tends to be on preventing another such tragedy.

"The new guidelines need to point practitioners to best practice to support parents as well as infants over the whole period from conception to after the separation."

Harriet Ward, Honorary Research Fellow at the Rees Centre, says, "The research has highlighted numerous challenges at both system and practice levels that need to be addressed to provide better support for parents and professionals as they struggle with issues that have long-term consequences for all concerned."

Lead researcher and Co-Investigator Claire Mason, from Lancaster University, says, "We are incredibly grateful to the professionals and parents with lived experience who have worked with us on this project. The aim of the guidelines is to improve practice to give parents the maximum support to avoid separation if possible, but if a separation is

the outcome, to ensure that practice is as sensitive as possible, to minimize the trauma to parents."

The research study aimed to identify key challenges and good practice examples from different stages of the parent and baby journey, pre-birth, in maternity settings and when parents return home alone, without their newborn.

Further work is being undertaken to ensure the guidelines are inclusive and meet the needs of parents from [minority groups](#), including those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups and those with learning difficulties. More work is also planned to ensure further consideration of the specific needs of fathers and kinship carers.

Parallel research is also being completed in Australia. The team are working closely with the Government Departments to explore any implications for policy and legislative implications.

This is the first study to capture a holistic picture of compulsory state intervention at birth, from the perspectives of parents and professionals. The study included focus groups and interviews with [parents](#) who had been separated from their babies at birth, midwives, [social workers](#), Cafcass workers, foster carers and heads of local authority legal services.

The draft guidelines are grounded in systematic research with eight local authority areas and corresponding health trusts in England and Wales and are published in response to a call for more national guidance for professionals working in children's social care, health services and the courts to ensure best practice. The full peer reviewed report from the underlying research is also published today. The [draft guidelines](#), published by Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, are based on these data, and aim to deliver better and more consistent [practice](#).

Between now and August 2022, the participating local authorities and NHS trusts are working with the team to test the feasibility of the guidelines. Findings from this feasibility study will inform a final version of the guidelines, which will be published later in 2022.

The research is part of the Born into Care series, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and led by the Centre for Child & Family Justice Research at Lancaster University working with the Rees Centre at Oxford University. The first report in the series documented escalating rates of care proceedings for [babies](#).

More information: Broadhurst, K., Alrouh, B., Mason, C., Ward, H., Holmes, L., Ryan, M. and Bowyer, S., (2018). [Born into care: Newborns in care proceedings in England](#). London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

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Mason, C., Broadhurst, K., Ward, H., Barnett, A. and Holmes, L. (2022) [Born into Care: Developing best practice guidelines for when the state intervenes at birth](#). Nuffield Family Justice Observatory: London

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