

# Scoping review: mapping clinical guidelines and policy documents that address the needs of women who are dependent on drugs during the perinatal period.



This review maps the guidelines for the care of women who use or are in treatment for drug use during the perinatal period.

It identifies key best practice recommendations, including multidisciplinary working and an empathetic, trauma-informed approach to care. More recommendations are needed for women postnatally whose babies have been taken into care.

## Introduction

Women who use or are in treatment for drug use during the perinatal period often have multiple complex needs, co-occurring health issues and along with their babies, are more likely to experience poor outcomes.

They are at an elevated risk of death by suicide or drug related overdose, and in the UK, there are increasing numbers of infants subject to care proceedings, placed in kinship care or taken from mothers who have complex needs.

## What was the study?

Researchers conducted a scoping review of guidance documents outlining how health and social care professionals should care for women who use drugs or are in treatment for drug use during the perinatal period and their babies in the UK.

## Results and conclusions

- Overall, documents recommended an integrated model of care with a lead professional, and with clear referral pathways and information sharing protocol. More recent documents recommended working in a trauma-informed way, with practitioners recognising women's complex histories.
- There was a range of methods used to create guidance documents and evidence drawn on to support recommendations. The review identified that 28% used research evidence, and only 13% consulted with people with lived experience. In order that policy guidance is acceptable and effective, it is important to consult service users (or women with lived experience), as well as drawing on meta-analysis and systematic review evidence.
- The review identified a gap in recommendations for the care of women who have their babies removed. More recommendations are needed for the support of this particularly vulnerable population.
- This scoping review identified the need for a systematic review assessing the effectiveness of interventions for this population.

## Implications for policy and practice

- There is a lack of recommendations about supporting women whose babies have been taken, especially at birth. Women whose babies have been removed within the perinatal period are at increased risk of relapse and death by suicide or drug related overdose and may require additional mental and physical health support.
- When developing or updating guidance documents it is important to include the experiences of women with living and lived experience, and where possible co-produce best practice recommendations. Drawing on a broad range of high-quality evidence alongside consultation methods will ensure that documents are evidence-informed and effective.

## If citing this research, please reference the following papers:

Gilmour, L., Honeybul, L., Lewis, S. et al. Scoping review: mapping clinical guidelines and policy documents that address the needs of women who are dependent on drugs during the perinatal period. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 24, 84 (2024).  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-023-06172-6>