



Freebirth and Social Services

Melissa Thomas describes her experience of a babymoon shattered by intervention

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My first experience of birth was truly empowering. After a reflective pregnancy I was afraid of labour, but during the process I managed to let go and embrace my instincts. I had a wonderful, natural water birth in hospital. It was the beginning of a healing journey that was a rite of passage. I learned a great deal about myself and life in this time and when I discovered I was pregnant again I knew it would bring a new path to walk.

For my second pregnancy I opted to have minimum contact with maternity services and I began to consider freebirth. What appealed to me about not having midwives present is the freedom and control it gives back to women and birth. I could imagine nothing more peaceful than allowing birth to take over with no interference. The more I thought about having midwives attend, the more I felt it would be detrimental to my birthing experience.

I don't have a personal issue with midwives, or hospitals. I think they do an excellent job under great pressure but I don't believe that all women automatically need care in such a systematic way and particularly against a medical setting. There is a place for these services and it's great that they are available for true emergencies. However, more often than not this power can be abused and many women end up with a birth experience they find difficult to process.

Birth should not be feared but embraced. I believe in a woman's ability to birth successfully, provided she is surrounded by the right, supportive environment that she is able to make an informed decision about. Our bodies are designed to give life and this can be a powerful, emotional and spiritual experience. I have developed strong opinions about birth through research, a passionate interest in the subject and the issues around it. However, I did not want my own experience to be caught up with this political aspect. By opting to freebirth I wasn't rejecting the system or trying to work against the grain, I just followed my instincts and trusted my decisions.

I discussed my decision to freebirth with my local Supervisor of Midwives (SoM) as at 30 weeks pregnant, I decided to opt out of antenatal care. My pregnancy was going well, I was able to source my own information effectively and I did not feel I was benefiting from attending appointments with a midwife. The SoM was very thorough in questioning me about my decision to ensure I was not choosing freebirth out of fear, which I assured her was not the case. She appeared supportive, even though she did not seem to understand. I was aware that the Nursing and Midwifery Council guidelines regarding freebirth

detailed that a midwife should support a woman in her decisions even if she does not agree and this knowledge made me feel relieved that the SoM would support my family and me.

However, shortly after receiving a supportive letter from the SoM, including a copy of the NMC freebirth guidelines, I received a letter from Social Services. They requested an appointment with me, at my home to discuss if they could 'offer any help', even though they had not detailed the reason for their concern. I was unable to make contact with anyone at their office and so decided to write a letter explaining my decision to freebirth, using quotes from health professionals guidelines and the Human Rights Law Article 8, the right to privacy and family life; all of which support and protect my decision and freedom to do so.

It was two weeks before I heard from Social Services again and in this time my second baby, Oliver Ellis Thomas, was born unassisted, at home in the bath. It was a quick labour and an overwhelmingly beautiful experience that was profound. Undisturbed in birth I felt I had experienced a true moment of clarity and freedom, that was to become a solid grounding for me to return to over the coming weeks' subsequently stressful events.

Six days after Oliver's birth I received a phone call from a social worker. She informed me that she would like to visit me at my home the following day to discuss our plans to freebirth. I declined her offer, once again explaining my reasons for choosing the birth I wanted and how the law protected me in this decision. She was reluctant to listen to what I had to say and rapidly adopted an aggressive tone, repeatedly raising her voice and talking over me. Being only six days postnatal I found it very difficult to remain composed and informed her that I was hanging up the phone. At this stage I did not feel in a position to inform her of Oliver's birth as I had not received any official documentation with regards to why Social Services wanted to speak with me or what my rights were. The next morning I promptly contacted AIMS for advice about the position I was in and how to proceed as I was concerned that Social Services may visit my home regardless of the fact that I had asked them not to.

That afternoon two social workers arrived, unannounced, at our home. I requested the referral notes for my case, which they did not have. However, after answering the door, and noticeably not being pregnant any more, Social Services were clearly now aware that my baby had been born. When they returned with the appropriate documentation they informed our family that 'head office' had decided it had become necessary to issue a Section 47 under the Child Protection Law against our family. This was an incredibly scary accusation. We were not fully aware of what this actually meant and the words 'Child Protection', 'law' and 'Social Services' carry a lot of weight. We were extremely afraid that they potentially had the power to take our children away from us and this was a distressing prospect. Social Services wanted to carry out an assessment of our children and family but as we still had not been given a reason for their interference we refused to allow them entry to our home. They handed over the referral notes and left on the grounds that we would contact them to make an appointment.

When we eventually looked through the notes, we discovered that the original referral had been made by a local community midwife, one I had not met before, with the support of the SoM. The contents were

brief and appeared to be centred around the concern that, *'Melissa has continued to refuse to engage with midwifery services and wishes to self deliver at home. This would mean she would have no medical assistance.'* The letter also stated that my family were not registered with a GP, even though this was not the case. Upon reading these words I felt incredibly angry at the misrepresentation of the actual circumstances. I would not describe my behaviour as a 'refusal to engage'. I had made an informed decision to no longer seek care from midwifery services, which for me, was not an issue, I was enjoying a healthy pregnancy with no complications much the same as when I was pregnant with my first child. It was the right decision for my family and I had hoped that our wishes would be respected, after all, I was under the impression that maternity services were optional rather than mandatory.

After processing this information I was concerned that Social Services had felt it appropriate to investigate our family in the manner in which events unfolded. Rather than considering the points I raised within my letter, listening to what I had to say or even contacting the SoM to encourage communication through midwifery they decided to call at our home unannounced for the third time in one day escorted by the police. Seeing two uniformed officers at my door filled me with panic. After initially being hesitant, we answered the door and the police requested to see our children on our doorstep, which I found to be a completely humiliating experience.

Naturally, I was distraught and, being only seven days post natal, I was highly emotional. I found it difficult to communicate with the social worker and withdrew from further conversation. I took my son upstairs while my husband allowed them access to our home where he was questioned for almost an hour about our parenting.

Once they had left we were in a state of shock. We felt as though we were being persecuted for our decisions and beliefs as well as our rights and privacy being intruded upon. We felt helpless and bullied by their actions and our emotions ranged from anger to misery towards what was happening. The beautiful birth of our son was becoming a distant memory and the minimal two weeks paternity leave was quickly disappearing.

We had been in constant contact with AIMS throughout the day and the support from Beverley, alongside my trust in the fact that our actions were protected and within our rights helped us through this difficult time. Two days following the incident with the police, the SoM and a community midwife were sent to our home upon the request of Social Services. Despite the fact that we did not want any checks carrying out we felt unable to turn them away because of the position Social Services had placed us in. We felt backed into a corner by everyone involved. The midwives carried out newborn checks on my son as well as a post natal check upon myself. During our appointment with the midwives I was extremely upset and tearful. I tried to understand why this was happening to us but I could not get any satisfactory answers. When the midwives left I felt at my lowest. My spirit and post birth elation had been crushed. I was absolutely drained and I felt violated by those who were supposed to care for, support and protect my family, my decisions and my rights. At no point did I feel I had given consent for what took place. My wishes had been ignored, undermined and I was treated as though I was ignorant

and irresponsible.

It was only once the checks and procedures that Social Services deemed appropriate were carried out that the case against us was closed. However, we were not informed of this closure, we had to contact the office to have this information confirmed. At no point did Social Services express any regret over their heavy handed tactics, nor did they issue an apology to our family.

When we eventually received the final assessment it was clear that Social Services felt they had acted within reason, despite the fact that they quoted information that was not based upon fact or law and violated our rights under the Human Rights Act. The final assessment detailed that their entire investigation was based upon their research into our contact with midwifery, GP's and health visitors, all of which are not a legal requirement, as well as Social Services opinion of what they considered was in the best interest of our children.

We are currently in the process of making a formal complaint against Social Services and an independent investigation is being carried out by the Local Supervising Authority Midwifery Officer (LSAMO) into the conduct of the midwives. We should have the full report in the new year and we are hoping for stronger guidelines to be implemented regarding freebirth, particularly with respect to referrals, and that midwives are up to date with relevant policies.

Of course, I understand that Social Services do have a certain amount of duty to follow up particular cases where a child is potentially at risk and that women don't always choose freebirth for positive reasons, I cannot speak for these women and how they have come to make their decisions. I also appreciate the fact that our case is not likely to be something Social Services come across regularly and so they felt unsure about how to proceed.

While it is all too easy to say that Social Services feel a certain amount of pressure with cases involving babies after the much publicised 'baby P', this does not justify their over reaction and bullying behaviour. Social Services had a number of options available, and should have made themselves aware of the appropriate laws and guidelines before they took the case out of proportion. This kind of action only serves to further isolate women and families from services or professionals that they may need to access, but now may feel they have no option. The underlying fact is, that when it comes to being pregnant and giving birth it is a woman's decision as to how, where and with whom this happens. It is her right and this is protected by law.

Melissa Thomas