



Embargoed until midnight Sunday 2nd August

Covid-19 exposes fragility of infant feeding support in the UK

With breastfeeding support under strain, service providers propose plan to tackle inequalities

This World Breastfeeding Week (1-7 August 2020), we are calling on the UK government to address the fragility of breastfeeding support services.

Our organisations have seen first-hand how the Covid-19 crisis has exposed the fragility of infant feeding support available for women, parents and families.

Over the past few months, the need to support babies and families has escalated and support services have been stretched beyond anything in our experience.

Existing variations in provision for infant feeding support have increased as services have been cut, health visiting teams redeployed and provision moved online, leading to unknown outcomes on infant nutritional health, worsening maternal mental health and widening health inequalities.

Tremendous efforts from the NHS and Third Sector organisations, including many volunteers on the National Breastfeeding Helpline and other charity-run helplines, along with swift adaptation to offer online support, have provided many families with support but this is not sustainable without a longer term strategy.

Meanwhile, the need to protect infant and young child feeding in pandemic emergencies has not previously been considered and has been entirely missing from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies' reports.

Investing in the health of new families, including supporting and protecting breastfeeding and supporting safe and responsive formula or mixed feeding, enables children not just to survive, but to thrive.

Rebuilding infant feeding support for communities after Covid-19 and giving important attention to the needs of mothers and children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds will help tackle inequalities.

Infant feeding is a critical component of first 1001 Days and Early Years Health

We welcome the appointment of Andrea Leadsom MP as the Government's Early Years Health Adviser and the announcement of a review at a time when infant feeding support services for women, parents and families have been stretched to an unprecedented degree.

Protecting breastfeeding and ensuring safe and responsive formula and mixed feeding during those first 1001 days would make a significant contribution to reducing inequalities in health. As a result, it also upholds the work of the NHS and helps build a healthier population.

While COVID-19 has undoubtedly placed a strain on support systems, it has also highlighted a huge omission in UK policy on planning for the care and feeding of infants and young children in case of emergencies, leaving our youngest members of society vulnerable.

While the benefits of breastfeeding are well-evidenced, merely stating these benefits does not ensure breastfeeding is protected or supported. At a time of global health crisis, and increasing recognition of the impact of human behaviour on the health of our planet, support for breastfeeding is also an environmental imperative.

10-point Infant Feeding Action Plan to address Inequalities

We call on the UK government to adopt the following **10-point Infant Feeding Action Plan** below which has a particular focus on working to reduce inequalities:

1. For the new Government Early Years Advisor to appoint a **permanent, multi-sectoral maternal, infant and young child nutrition strategy group** to implement a national strategy to support good nutrition across the first 1001 days.
2. To commission and **sustainably fund universal, accessible, confidential breastfeeding support** delivered by specialist/lead midwives, health visitors and suitably qualified breastfeeding specialists, recognising the role of charitable organisations and community groups and their strong links with communities.
3. Ensure there **are children's centres or family hubs**, disproportionately located in areas of disadvantage, offering **joined-up universal services from pregnancy onwards**, that include breastfeeding peer support, guidance on the introduction of solids and eating well in the early years.
4. To **ensure that health visiting services are properly funded** and the number of health visitors increased to ensure consistent timely nutritional support for all families to support good maternal and infant mental and physical health.
5. To **integrate planning to support infant and young child feeding in emergencies** into legislation, the Civil Contingencies Act, and Local Resilience Forums across the country.
6. To recognise the importance of breastmilk for preterm and vulnerable babies and the need for equitable access to donor breastmilk for these babies through the **establishment of a fully funded regional donor milk banking service**.
7. To **implement the Unicef UK Baby Friendly Initiative across community, hospital and neonatal services**, building on the recommendation for all maternity services to be accredited in the NHS Long Term Plan.
8. To **make it a statutory right of working mothers** to access a private space and paid breaks to breastfeed and/or express breastmilk and manage its safe storage.
9. To **support the commitment to re-instate the quintennial Infant Feeding Survey** which builds on data previously collected every five years since 1975, most recently in 2010.
10. To **protect babies from harmful commercial interests** by bringing, as a minimum, the full World Health Organisation International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes into UK law and enforcing this law.

For more information and references, please visit:

www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/2020statement

For enquiries, please email CEO@breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk

The Breastfeeding Network
Association of Breastfeeding Mothers
NCT
La Leche League GB
HENRY
Institute of Health Visiting
Best Beginnings
Human Milk Foundation
Local Infant Feeding Information Board
Lactation Consultants of Great Britain
World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative UK
Hospital Infant Feeding Network

GP Infant Feeding Network
UK Association of Milk Banking
Diversity in Infant Feeding
Better Breastfeeding
Nursing Matters
Save Time Support Breastfeeding
Swansea University
Breastfeeding Twins and Triplets