



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

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18th. February 2021

Deputy Colm Burke
TD
Dail Eireann
Kildare Street
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PQ6150/21: To ask the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the establishment of an online telehealth lactation service for mothers nationwide and which could be easily accessed and provide 24/7 support to parents with new-borns; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Burke,

The above PQ has been forwarded to my Department for a direct response to you on same.

We know breastfeeding support is most effective where it is face to face, scheduled and predictable and provided by trained health professionals and/or peer counsellors. Midwives and Public Health Nurses are trained and are skilled in supporting breastfeeding commencing in the antenatal period with the delivery of antenatal/breastfeeding education.

Midwives support mothers to establish breastfeeding immediately after birth and help mothers learn the skill of breastfeeding in the immediate post natal period.

Public Health Nurses, many of whom are Midwives and Paediatric Nurses are also trained and skilled in providing breastfeeding support throughout the post natal period.

Every mother is visited by a Public Health Nurse within 72 hours of leaving hospital and home visits supporting breastfeeding mothers have continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Maternity hospital staff are available for support for 6 weeks if needed after mothers and babies are discharged home from hospital.

Integrating routine lactation consultant support improves the experience of care mothers receive and breastfeeding initiation and duration rates. Breastfeeding clinics and online breastfeeding support meetings are provided by the HSE and HSE funded voluntary breastfeeding organisations around the country.

Facilitators of these groups have International Board Certified Lactation Consultant qualifications or are experienced trained peer counsellors.

There are 30.89 Whole Time Equivalent lactation consultant posts within Maternity and Public Health Nursing services providing specialist support for mothers experiencing challenges with breastfeeding and supporting the development of skills and knowledge of front line staff.

Other supports have been developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a number of hospital antenatal breastfeeding classes and some breastfeeding groups run by the HSE and voluntary organisations moving online.

Over 60 virtual breastfeeding support group meetings are held each month. Phone and virtual breastfeeding support is also being made available to replace face-to-face appointments, while face-to-face one-to-ones are being provided where needed.

The HSE provides a free online breastfeeding advice and information service, staffed by experienced lactation consultants, 7 days a week. The *Ask our Expert* service, established in 2015, is a 24/7 service. Mothers can email or live chat with a lactation consultant and discuss any questions they have.

The service was externally evaluated in 2019 and was shown to be a highly valued and effective service by mothers using the service. There was a 38% increase in demand for the service in 2020 with almost 4,000 breastfeeding questions answered via live chat or email.

I trust this information will be of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin Kelleher', with a horizontal line underneath.

DR. KEVIN KELLEHER, FFPHM, FFPHMI
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