



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

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24TH. February 2021

Deputy Sean Sherlock
TD
Dail Eireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

PQ Question 8676/21: To ask the Minister for Health the volume of supports that go into breastfeeding support within the HSE; if he will detail each of these supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Sherlock,

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

The HSE is committed to protecting, supporting and promoting breastfeeding. Given the extraordinary circumstances of the Covid-19 global pandemic, there may be variations in some maternity support services in the community, as local service providers work to adhere to public health measures to minimise risks and ensure the safety of families and staff. We appreciate the patience shown by families as we work through these difficult months, providing high-quality maternity and infant care and keeping our patients and services safe from COVID-19.

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. This represents an increase of 12.97 Whole Time Equivalent Lactation Consultant posts in the last 4 years. It is acknowledged that these numbers are low when compared with international staffing benchmarks and there are gaps in availability throughout the country. A further 6.5 Lactation Consultant posts and a national lead to support implementation of National Standards for the Baby Friendly Initiative in hospitals have been funded through the National Maternity Strategy and are expected to be in post in 2021.

Other supports have been developed during the 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 run a free online breastfeeding advice and information service staffed by experienced lactation consultants 7 days a week. This 24/7 service was set up in 2015 where Mothers can e mail 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 e-mail.

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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