



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

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Deputy Michael Moynihan
TD
Dail Eireann
Kildare Street
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PQ16645/21: To ask the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of the HSE Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016 – 2021; if there are plans in place for a new breastfeeding action plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Moynihan,

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

The HSE Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland Action Plan 2016-2021 is the framework for progressing supports for breastfeeding in Ireland. Since its publication, the HSE has established the National Breastfeeding Implementation Group to progress a range of actions to:

- improve governance and health service structures,
- develop new breastfeeding training programmes,
- develop evidenced based policies and practices
- communicate the importance of breastfeeding through social marketing, support and advocacy and
- monitor and evaluate breastfeeding services.

The National Breastfeeding Implementation Group is partnering with key divisions to provide the supports that mothers require at all stages of the breastfeeding continuum.

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of some actions, the HSE will extend the implementation of the Breastfeeding Action Plan into 2022 and continue to work on priority outstanding actions. The following provides an update on the status of delivery of actions under the 5 priority areas within the plan.

Improved Governance and Health Service Structures

Up until 2020 the implementation of the Breastfeeding Action Plan has been undertaken within existing HSE resources. Funding for 3 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) additional lactation consultant posts, in maternity hospitals/units, was received in 2020. A further 4.5 WTE lactation consultant posts will be funded through the National Maternity Strategy in 2021.

There are currently 30.39 WTE dedicated lactation consultant posts across maternity hospitals/units and the Public Health Nursing (PHN) service providing specialised care for mothers experiencing challenges with breastfeeding. They also support the development of skills and knowledge of other front line colleagues. This represents an increase of 12.97 WTE lactation consultant posts in the last 4 years.

Comparisons with international staffing benchmarks suggest that there is a requirement for additional posts dedicated to lactation support to ensure timely skilled assistance for mothers and support the development of skills and knowledge of front line staff.

The National Women and Infants Health Programme (National Maternity Strategy) is funding additional lactation consultant posts, this year, to ensure every maternity unit/hospital will have dedicated posts in place. The Baby Friendly Initiative will receive dedicated implementation support this year also.

Health Service Policies and Practices

- A range of supports for breastfeeding are provided from antenatal care services, care immediately after birth and throughout the post natal period in maternity hospitals/units and community services. Midwives support the establishment of breastfeeding immediately after birth and help mothers learn the skill of breastfeeding in the immediate post natal period. PHNs, many of whom are midwives and paediatric nurses, are trained and skilled in providing breastfeeding support throughout the post natal period.
- Breastfeeding clinics and breastfeeding support groups are provided by the HSE and HSE-funded voluntary breastfeeding organisations around the country. Breastfeeding clinics and groups are run by midwives and PHNs who have the International Board Certified Lactation Consultant qualifications or are experienced trained peer counsellors. 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. There are approximately 70 virtual breastfeeding support group meetings taking place each month. Phone and virtual breastfeeding support is also being made available to replace face-to-face appointments, in line with national COVID-19 guidance.
- A new Breastfeeding Policy for Staff working in the Public Health Service came into effect in February 2021. This will support staff to continue to breastfeeding on return to work following maternity leave. This policy is being implemented on a cost neutral basis and will allow employees to take 1-hour paid breastfeeding breaks up until their child's second birthday, in line with WHO/DOH Infant Feeding recommendations.
- A new Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes in public health services is in final draft and is due for implementation, across all health services in 2021. The clinical Infant Feeding Policies for Maternity and Neonatal services and Community Services and Primary Care Team were updated in 2019 and 2018 respectively. A new National Breastfeeding Observation and Assessment Guideline and Tool was rolled out at the end of 2018 for use in primary care services by Public Health Nurses.

Training for Health Service Staff

- The HSE Nurture Infant Health & Wellbeing Programme is funding initiatives to contribute to increasing the rates and duration of breastfeeding. This includes the development of new standards for antenatal education, nutrition e learning modules and a suite of breastfeeding training programmes. This will make training more widely available to a broader range of front line staff who are supporting mothers and babies to breastfeed, including midwives, public health nurses, community medical doctors, practice nurses and other support staff. Two new eLearning breastfeeding modules have been available since 2018 and nutrition modules including formula feeding came online in 2019. An accompanying skills-based programme for breastfeeding is currently in development.

Social Marketing, Support and Advocacy

- The mychild.ie website, part of HSE.ie, provides information to parents-to-be and parents of young children. It received 3.5 million visits in 2020. The mychild.ie website covers pregnancy, labour and birth, babies and toddlers. Topics include symptoms and conditions, breastfeeding, nutrition, everyday care, development, parenting advice and child safety. There are more than 500 pages of information on the site. The website is promoted all year-round on social media and Google search, alongside advertising campaigns at specific times e.g. National Breastfeeding week

- Parents can also contact a team of lactation consultants through the ‘Ask our breastfeeding expert’ service on mychild.ie. The HSE’s online breastfeeding support service (Ask our Expert) is available seven days a week with the live chat service available Monday to Friday from 10am to 3pm. It was established in 2014. There was a 38% increase in demand for the service in 2020, largely due to COVID-19 restrictions impacting on face-to-face breastfeeding support with almost 4,000 breastfeeding questions answered via live chat or e-mail.
- As part of a Sláintecare-funded project, the mychild.ie website is being expanded. This will see 100 new information guides being added and a new pregnancy support journey to be launched later this year. The first phase of the project will mean pregnant women can sign up for weekly emails which will be tailored to the subscriber’s due date. The emails begin in early pregnancy and will include the first 3 months of a baby’s life. Another element of the Sláintecare project will see a pilot of a closed/private social media group led by a lactation consultant providing breastfeeding support to new mothers.
- Since the beginning of 2019, expectant mothers receive a copy of the new HSE My Pregnancy Book. This contains a wealth of useful information and tips for breastfeeding mothers. The HSE ‘Breastfeeding – a good start in life’ publication is also made widely available and was last updated in 2019. The HSE’s breastfeeding publication for sick and pre term babies is undergoing revision and will be available in Q1 2021.

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

The 2019 breastfeeding rates show that 63.4% of babies are breastfed (exclusive and non-exclusive) on discharge from hospital and 42.3% of babies are breastfed (exclusive and non-exclusive) at the 3-month PHN visit.

I trust this clarification will be of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,



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