



Office of the National Clinical Director for Health Protection

HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre

25-27 Middle Gardiner Street

Dublin, Ireland, D01 A4A3

Ph +353 1 8765300

ncdhp@hpsc.ie

www.hpsc.ie

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Deputy Jennifer Whitmore
TD
Dail Eireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 1

PQ 14287/22: To ask the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of plans to increase breastfeeding supports including the recruitment of lactation consultations across all hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Whitmore,

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 2023 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. 10.5 infant feeding/lactation posts have been funded through the National Maternity Strategy in 2020 & 2021 to ensure every maternity unit/hospital will have dedicated posts in place.

In 2021, funding for an additional 24 infant feeding/lactation posts was announced by the Minister for Health. These posts have been allocated and recruitment has commenced, with 10.5 assigned to hospital/maternity units and 14.5 to community services.

The HSE recruited a national lead at the end of 2021 to support implementation of infant feeding standards within maternity services. The HSE will provide an update on the status of recruitment across the services as part of the response to your question no 22/02177 later this month.

Education & Training

The National Healthy Childhood Programme has progressed the development of a standardised blended breastfeeding education program for front line staff supporting mothers and babies. This includes:

- updating of 2 existing eLearning units with new evidence
- development of a new additional 3rd eLearning module
- development of self directed, pre training resources
- development of classroom based skills based training
- supported facilitated clinical practice

The revised education programme will be rolled out 2022.

Staff education seminars were facilitated by each maternity service, La Leche League, DCU, Association of Lactation Consultants of Ireland, Pavee Point, National Women's Council and Baby Feeding Law Group Ireland and the National Breastfeeding Implementation group throughout the last year.

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. There is a gradual return of in-person breastfeeding support groups since public health guidance now permits the meeting of groups. A lot was learned through online service delivery and maternity and community services are providing a hybrid model of in-person and online services to make breastfeeding supports as accessible as possible. There are approximately 70 virtual breastfeeding support group meetings taking place each month.

Two new policies came into effect in 2021

- *Breastfeeding Policy for Staff working in the Public Health Service* - HSE staff can now avail of breastfeeding breaks at work for up to one hour per normal working day, in addition to normal rest breaks.

- *HSE Policy on the Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes* – This policy outlines how the HSE can support the recommendations that all parents, whichever way they feed their baby, have access to accurate and effective information free from the influence of marketing campaigns. The HSE, BFLGI, ICGP and the FSAI held a launch webinar for staff on the importance of and how to work within the code of marketing at the end of 2021.

Social Marketing, Support and Advocacy

The HSE resource ‘Breastfeeding for your sick or premature baby’ was updated and a new publication ‘Breastfeeding Information for traveller beoirs’ was developed in conjunction with Pavee Point to support discussions with Traveller women on feeding their babies in 2021.

The popular free online breastfeeding advice and information service "ask our breastfeeding expert" provided by the HSE answered over 3,800 breastfeeding questions via live chat or e-mail in 2021. The service is available seven days a week with live chat available on Monday to Friday from 10am to 3pm.

National Breastfeeding Week was celebrated and promoted by MyChild.ie from 1 – 7 October and highlighted the return of in person supports for parents and research findings on COVID-19 antibodies passing to babies through mothers’ breast milk.

With the support of Sláintecare funding, The HSE piloted 2 closed/private social media groups led by a lactation consultant providing breastfeeding support to new mothers.

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Breastfeeding metrics were for the first time reported on through the Irish Maternity Indicator System (IMIS) 2019 report, providing more up to date information on breastfeeding rates and practices in hospitals/units. Initiation of breastfeeding as the first feed after birth is reported as 62.3% in 2020 and 63.8% in 2019.

Data on breastfeeding rates in maternity services for 2020 is available from the national perinatal reporting system 2020 report available at www.hpo.ie and the Irish maternity indicator system report 2020 available at <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/acute-hospitals-division/woman-infants/national-reports-on-womens-health/irish-maternity-indicator-system-national-report-2020.pdf>

I trust this information will be of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,



DR. JOHN CUDDIHY
DIRECTOR OF HPSC AND OFFICE OF THE NATIONAL CLINICAL DIRECTOR FOR
HEALTH PROTECTION
Medical Council Registration Number: 016227