



National Healthy Childhood Programme,
HSE Area Office,
Arden Rd,
Tullamore,
Co. Offaly
R35 TY28

18th October 2022

Deputy Cairns,
Dáil Éireann,
Leinster House
Dublin 2

PQ Ref 48087/22 : To ask the Minister for Health if he will provide details on the progress made in meeting each of the objectives of Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland Health Service Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016 to 2021 as of 25 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Ref 48088/22: To ask the Minister for Health the actions that he has taken since taking office to ensure progress in reaching the objectives of the Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland Health Service Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016 to 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. – Deputy Holly Cairns

Dear Deputy Cairns,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Questions, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position.

The HSE Breastfeeding in a Healthy Ireland Action Plan 2016-2021 is the framework for progressing supports for breastfeeding parents in the HSE. The plan is extended until the end of 2023. Since its publication the HSE has established the National Breastfeeding Implementation Group who are partnering with key divisions to progress a range of actions under 5 key areas:

Improved Governance and Health Service Structures

Midwives and public health nurses are the primary front line staff to support breastfeeding commencing in the antenatal period with the delivery of breastfeeding preparation and antenatal classes and enabling mothers to establish breastfeeding in the early days and weeks. Breastfeeding mothers receive follow up support throughout the postnatal period, where needed. The HSE have invested in fifteen new community midwifery early transfer services which provide outreach services from the hospital, working alongside the public health nurse services and general practice service, that will provide the woman with integrated care as close to home as possible. The HSE have also recently funded the establishment of postnatal hubs which also will strengthen the support available to women and their babies following birth and will target care in a range of areas where women may be experiencing challenges or feel that they are struggling e.g. Infant Feeding.

Infant feeding/lactation nurses and midwives in HSE services provide a specialist support service to mothers who need extra support to breastfeed e.g. gestational diabetes in pregnancy, caesarean section, premature birth, when baby is medically unwell or has a tongue tie. Each hospital and community service with these post holders has a pathway of care to access lactation specialist services when required. Infant feeding /lactation midwives and nurses also play an important role in supporting pregnant women and mothers from marginalised groups or communities

and who need additional support to breastfeed. The HSE have partnered with Pavee Point to develop culturally specific health information on breastfeeding.

34.5 new dedicated infant feeding/lactation posts have been approved in the last two years, 10.5 by the National Maternity strategy and 24 as a Ministerial priority to ensure nationwide availability and access to specialised lactation support within hospital and community services. Filling approved lactation posts remains a priority for the HSE to further build and enhance breastfeeding supports across all Community Healthcare Organisations and Hospital Groups. The recruitment of these posts across services remains a dynamic situation as recruitment is ongoing. 20 of the 34.5 of the new posts have been filled, with a further 9.5 in recruitment. While these posts are a priority, it is acknowledged that recruitment is challenging for nursing related grades within some community areas. There are currently 44.6 WTE dedicated Lactation Consultant posts across Maternity Hospitals (31.3 WTE) and units and Public Health Nursing (13.3 WTE) services to provide specialised care for mothers experiencing challenges with breastfeeding. This represents an increase of 27 WTE Lactation Consultant posts in the last 4 years.

Health Service Policies and Practices

- The HSE developed Standards for infant Feeding in Maternity Services in May 2022 and appointed a national lead to support implementation of this programme of work with the 19 maternity hospitals and units at the end of 2021. Various national clinical guidelines for the care of mothers and infants have been updated in 2022, 2019 and 2018.
- All maternity and children's hospitals have clinical guidelines relating to the care of sick and pre term babies and the prioritisation of mothers breast milk and Donor Expressed Breast Milk (DEBM). DEBM is available in all hospitals providing care to these babies. The HSE has a national purchasing contract in place with the Western Health & Social Care Trust Human Milk Bank based in Enniskillen. The HSE is monitoring the provision of donor human milk to hospitals to ensure a continuous supply is available in line with clinical infant feeding guidelines.
- The HSE provide and fund voluntary breastfeeding organisations to provide community based supports throughout the country. There are approximately 110 breastfeeding services available nationwide and more are returning each week, as suitable spaces within communities are secured and more staff and volunteers to run the groups are available. Some breastfeeding groups are adopting a hybrid approach and continuing to meet online due to mothers and service demands. All freely available breastfeeding supports are promoted on the HSE's mychild.ie and as part of the HSE's public messaging campaigns.
- The HSE as the largest employer in the country adopted a significant leadership position on breastfeeding in Feb 2021 by enabling Staff working in the Public Health Services to take breastfeeding breaks on their return from maternity leave in February 2021. 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.
- The HSE policy on the marketing of breast milk substitutes and new standards for infant feeding in maternity services requires that there is no advertising of formula milk, teats, bottles and soothers in any part of the maternity services and that staff take active measures to protect themselves and parents by not participating in formula industry sponsored training and events. The HSE provide evidenced based impartial information and support on feeding options and do not advise on any particular brands where others are formula feeding.

Training for Health Service Staff

Midwives and public health nurses are trained to support breastfeeding as part of undergraduate training programmes. Hospital and community services provide ongoing training for their staff.

The HSE with the support of the Nurture Infant Health & Wellbeing Programme has progressed the development of a National Infant Feeding Education Programme for Health Care Providers caring for mothers and babies. This will make training more widely available to a broader range of front line staff including; midwives, public health nurses, practice nurses, GP's, community medical doctors and other support staff.

The education programme includes:

- updating of 2 current eLearning units with new evidence and a new additional 3rd e-Learning module
- development of self- directed learning materials
- breastfeeding skills training
- breastfeeding clinical practice learning

The new online training materials are accessible on HSEland since October 1st 2022. The National Healthy Childhood Programme will engage with acute and community HSE services, GP & practice nursing services, HEI's and professional groups on the implementation of the National Infant Feeding Education Programme for relevant disciplines.

Social Marketing, Support and Advocacy

The mychild.ie website, part of HSE.ie, provides information to parents-to-be and parents of young children. The website is part of a suite of information supports provided both directly by practitioners and online. This suite of resources includes MyPregnancy, MyChild 0-2, Mychild 2-5 and Breastfeeding a good start in life books available to all expectant parents.

The mychild.ie website covers pregnancy, labour and birth, babies and toddlers and provides extensive information on every aspect of breastfeeding. This includes preparing while pregnant, the first days, positioning and attachment, expressing milk, common challenges, taking medication, drinking alcohol, weaning, returning to work and more. The website gives information on the free supports available to new parents, including a local breastfeeding support group finder, and it provides an 'ask the expert' live chat and email service.

In the last 4 years, the HSE has invested in a promotional campaign for parents aged 25 to 45 on mychild.ie and as one of the most popular topics, breastfeeding features strongly in this ongoing campaign. The HSE investment in mychild.ie in 2022 is 615,000, an increase of 85,000 compared with 2021. In 2022, the campaign includes digital search and social media advertising, radio 30sec and 10sec (specific to breastfeeding) and digital audio advertising, video on demand and display advertising as well as media partnerships. The website experienced huge growth during the pandemic with website visits rising from 1.4 million in 2019 to 5.6 million in 2021. It has had 4.3 million visits so far this year.

The HSE also runs MyChild social media channels on Facebook and Instagram, where breastfeeding topics are regularly featured. Once a year the HSE runs an awareness week from 1 to 7 October on breastfeeding. It focuses on sharing expert interviews and parent stories through national and local media, internal communications on breastfeeding within the health service, radio advertising and social media engagement with the public. This year the week focused on encouraging parents to take up the free expert help available.

In 2023, the HSE is planning 5 weeks of advertising on TV pointing parents to mychild.ie for information on child health. It is anticipated that this will make more parents aware of the website and encourage more to visit the website and use the expert advice it offers on pregnancy, breastfeeding and parenting of young children.

Parents can contact the HSE's online breastfeeding support service through the '*Ask our breastfeeding expert*' service on mychild.ie. The service was established in 2014 and is provided by a team of lactation consultants. It is available seven days a week with the live chat service available Monday to Friday from 10am to 3pm. In 2021, 4,000 breastfeeding questions answered via live chat or e-mail. In 2023, closed/private social media group led by a lactation consultant providing breastfeeding support to new mothers for a period of 12 weeks after discharge from hospital will be expanded.

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation

Latest data indicates that 63% of mothers commence breastfeeding as the first feed after birth in hospital.

There was a 4.8% increase in the number of babies breastfed at the first public health nurse visit at 58.8% (exclusive and non-exclusive) in 2021 up from 54% in 2019.

Breastfeeding at the 3 month developmental check up (exclusive and non-exclusive) was 42.3% in 2019, up from 39% in 2017.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Anne Parry". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'A'.

Anne Parry, General Manager, National Healthy Childhood Programme & Chair of HSE National Breastfeeding Implementation group