

**REPORT TO:** Health & Wellbeing Board  
**DATE:** 15 January 2025  
**REPORTING OFFICER:** Director of Public Health  
**PORTFOLIO:** Health and Wellbeing  
**SUBJECT:** Infant Feeding  
**WARD(S)** Borough-wide

**1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 This report is to provide the Board with an update on the development of the Infant Feeding services and subsequent outcomes in Halton, as a result of investment from the Department of Health and Social Care through Family Hubs.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That:**

**1) The report be noted; and**

**2) The Board recognises continued partnership working in infant feeding services across Halton is vital.**

**3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

3.1 The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that babies are exclusively fed breastmilk for the first 6 months of life.

3.2 Breastfeeding gives babies the best start in life and offers health benefits to both the child and mother, both in the short-term and protects against ill-health throughout life.

Breastfed babies are less likely to have chest and gastro-intestinal infections, constipation, develop asthma, eczema, and are less likely to become obese. Benefits to mum include reduced risk of breast and ovarian cancer. These benefits can be particularly impactful for infants in lower socioeconomic groups.

3.3 Increasing breastfeeding rates in Halton among lower income families can do much to address inequalities. Financially, families can save hundreds of pounds in the first year alone if they breastfeed.

3.4 It is estimated that if all UK infants were exclusively breastfed, the number hospitalised each month with diarrhoea would be halved,

and the number hospitalised with a respiratory infection would be cut by a quarter. In the longer term it saves money through reducing childhood obesity. Moderate increases in breastfeeding would translate into cost savings for the NHS of many millions of pounds with initial investments paying off within just a few years (UNICEF).

3.5 Breastfeeding rates in Halton have slowly but steadily increased over the past 10 years. However, rates are significantly lower than the England average. Between 2014 and 2023, breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks increased from 21.8% to 25.7% in Halton. The England average in 2023 was 49.2%.

3.6 The current infant feeding service in Halton comprises the Infant Feeding Team within the Health Improvement Team (HIT) and the Infant Feeding Specialist Lead in NHS Bridgewater 0-19 Team. The team within HIT is led by the Start Well Practice Manager and operationally led by a Health Improvement Specialist. The team of Infant Feeding Support Workers deliver antenatal infant feeding workshops, contact and visit new parents upon discharge from hospital, facilitate breastfeeding groups and introducing solid foods workshops.

The Specialist Lead provides clinical supervision for the HIT Infant Feeding Team; offers specialist support for families; and works closely with the service lead in HIT to provide a joined-up service. Family Hub leads and Senior Early Help Officers are also key to the partnership - integrating the service in to the Family Hubs offer; providing staff to jointly facilitate groups and activities promoting and supporting breastfeeding; and completing audits for Breastfeeding Friendly Initiative (BFI) status (see 3.10).

3.7 Halton was awarded Family Hubs funding, which commenced in 2022/23. The ethos of Family Hubs is to provide comprehensive support to families to improve the lives of children. Family Hubs are a place-based way of joining up services and improving access for families.

3.8 One of the four funded workstreams was Infant Feeding, which had a set of core requirements to fulfil, plus 'go further' options to enhance the infant feeding offer. These requirements have been gradually implemented over the past two years, during which time the service has seen significant growth and development.

3.9 The core Infant Feeding service has developed in line with Halton's delivery plan, which includes:

- Further staff training to increase their skills and knowledge on more infant feeding issues.
- Tongue tie training for a number of practitioners for early identification of tongue tie.

- Addition of more breastfeeding groups which coincide with Health Visitor clinics on site.
- Co-location with health teams at Family Hubs sites
- Purchase of additional equipment, such as breast pumps and demonstration resources.
- Increased out-of-hours support using the Anya infant feeding and early parenting app, with expert specialists available during extended hours and intuitive AI support available 24/7.
- Funding of breastfeeding support on the postnatal ward at Warrington Hospital to increase maintenance of breastfeeding between birth and discharge.

3.10 Renewal of the Breastfeeding Friendly Initiative (BFI) accreditation of Halton Family Hubs, Infant Feeding Service and 0-19 service, will be completed in Summer 2025. BFI accreditation demonstrates that settings meet the evidence-based standards for supporting optimal infant feeding.

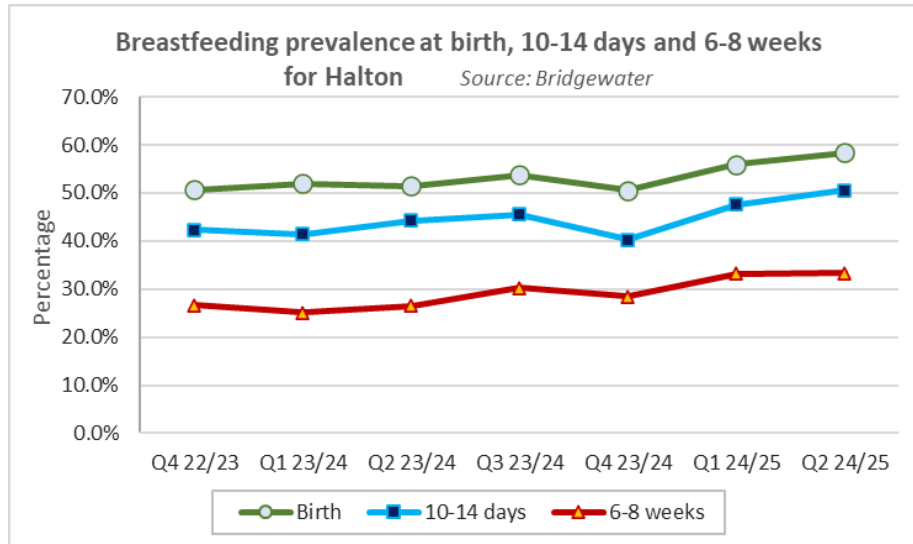
3.11 In addition to this, a significant focus has been on overcoming cultural barriers to breastfeeding. In Halton, breastfeeding is not the norm and a number of approaches are working to change this.

Over the past year a number of initiatives have been commenced:

- Completed insight work with local parents (mums and dads) and pregnant people to understand the local barriers to breastfeeding, and subsequently developed a campaign highlighting the benefits of breastfeeding in small steps and using personal stories to further promote these to parents in Halton.
- Re-introduced a Breastfeeding Welcome scheme for local venues and workplaces
- Offered small grants to local community venues and small businesses to enable them to accommodate and promote breastfeeding for service users and staff.
- Held an event at Norton Priory in July 2023 to celebrate world breastfeeding week; over 300 local parents, children and practitioners attended. The event saw the launch of the Holding Time audio trail, which is an art project in which women tell their unique breastfeeding stories to normalise talking about the realities. This included an art installation at Norton Priory, and portraits at Family Hub sites.
- Offered creative writing workshops in conjunction with the perinatal mental health workstream for women to process their challenging breastfeeding journeys and connect with others.
- Added a 'Mammals and their milk' session to the Health Improvement Team Healthy Schools programme.
- Recruited and trained 25 breastfeeding volunteers, managed by a Health Improvement Specialist at Health Improvement. They will support the core infant feeding service, and increase the

reach and utilisation of community assets in creating organic breastfeeding-friendly spaces.

3.12 Data throughout 2023 and 2024 is showing a steady increase above the target of 0.5% per year at all three recorded touchpoints.



Breastfeeding at birth:

2022/23	50.9%
2023/24	52%
<b>2024/25 to date</b>	<b>57.2%</b>

Breastfeeding at 10-14 days:

2022/23	42.1%
2023/24	42.9%
<b>2024/25 to date</b>	<b>49.1%</b>

Breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks:

2022/23	25.7%
2023/24	27.5%
<b>2024/25 to date</b>	<b>33.3%</b>

These rates are the highest ever recorded in Halton.

#### 4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The Halton Infant Feeding Strategy is in development, and will reflect the Cheshire & Merseyside Infant Feeding Strategy, which has been co-produced by a range of stakeholders and service users. The Halton strategy will incorporate local priorities to promote breastfeeding; support breastfeeding parents; normalise and protect breastfeeding; and include a focus on poverty and inequalities.

4.2 Breastfeeding has a strong evidence-base for improving health and wellbeing outcomes for both mum and baby, and as a result can

reduce health inequalities, particularly if parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are encouraged and supported to breastfeed. Breastfeeding is one of the most fundamental ways that a child can be given the best start in life and reduce the impact of poverty in the first few months of life.

- 4.3 The emotional wellbeing benefits of breastfeeding are also well-known, which can impact on the parent-infant bond, attachment and healthy emotional development of the child, which again is particularly valuable for infants born in to low-income households. This is relevant for wider partners outside of health and infant feeding, with knowledge of the benefits of breastfeeding and how to offer basic support and signposting being essential.

## 5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 As part of the Family Hubs programme, Halton was awarded around £504,000 to promote breastfeeding and support parents to meet their infant feeding goals. This funding was allocated across three years between April 2022 and March 2025, although delays in funding approval and receipt of funds meant that implementation commenced from early 2023.

- 5.2 Further funding has been made available for the continuation of Start for Life services in 2025/26, which should enable the continuation of expanded services and wider outreach to improve the culture of breastfeeding in Halton for a further 12 months.

- 5.3 Longer-term funding is required to continue the growth of the local support offer, maintain momentum to enable a cultural shift in Halton and to see breastfeeding rates continue to increase. As it stands, this is dependent on the Departments for Education and Health and Social Care. The ambition is that we can continue to close the gap on the breastfeeding rates between Halton and the rest of England.

## 6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

### 6.1 **Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence**

The short-term and life-long health benefits from breastfeeding are well known. The recommendation is that babies are exclusively breastfed for 6 months to give them the best immune protection and reduce risk of certain illnesses such as gastrointestinal infections, ear infections and respiratory illness, and longer-term conditions such as obesity and type 2 diabetes. The nutrients in breastmilk support brain development, and the skin-to-skin contact during breastfeeding strengthens the emotional bond between mother and baby.

Breastfeeding also improves health outcomes for mum, including reduced risk of breast and ovarian cancer and reduction risk of post-natal depression.

Supporting families to breastfeed is one of the most valuable ways we can give children the healthier start in life.

## 6.2 **Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy**

Breastfeeding reduces the incidence of childhood illnesses, which in turn lowers healthcare costs and demand on primary care.

Healthier children mean parents are less likely to miss work due to their child's illness.

Supporting breastfeeding mothers returning to work promotes gender equality by enabling mothers to maintain optimal infant feeding whilst continuing with their careers.

## 6.3 **Supporting Children, Young People and Families**

As long as mum is well and able to breastfeed, and there are no contraindications to breastfeeding, a baby can have all its nutritional needs met for the first six months of life, with benefits continuing when breastfeeding is continued beyond the introduction of solid foods. In the UK, only 1% of mothers exclusively breastfeed for the first six months. Most women discontinue breastfeeding before they want to, which can lead to sadness, anxiety and depression, as well as guilt.

Key to successful breastfeeding initiation and maintenance is timely support, which includes emotional support and practical assistance. Support of trained practitioners, peer supporters and lactation specialists are vital for mothers experiencing difficulties with feeding, whether that be challenges with complex feeding issues, emotional or other difficulties.

## 6.4 **Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need**

Mothers are less likely to breastfeed if they are:

- Low income
- Less educated
- Aged under 24
- Single mothers
- White ethnicity

Therefore, the wider work to address the cultural barriers to breastfeeding is crucial for the current and next generations of parents so that breastfeeding can be the norm for all parents, irrespective of their background.

In addition to this, targeted work with these populations in the antenatal period to encourage informed choice is vital, as well as tailored support to initiate and maintain breastfeeding.

## **6.5 Working Towards a Greener Future**

Breastfeeding offers several environmental benefits that can help mitigate climate change. The production and transportation of formula involves significant energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. There is increased waste as a result of formula packaging. Formula production involves dairy farming, which contributes to methane emissions, as well as water consumption.

Breastfeeding can help reduce the environmental impact of formula production and distribution globally, as well as reducing waste in Halton.

## **6.6 Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community**

Support of one's peers is beneficial when someone is in need. Growing the network of breastfeeding support in Halton, which is led by local people with lived experience is incredibly valuable. Using stories from local parents who can encourage others like them to consider breastfeeding, is an approach we are using to engage those less likely to breastfeed. Also, identifying breastfeeding advocates within the community will help with our mission of making breastfeeding welcomed and encouraged by all.

## **7.0 RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 Without continued investment for infant feeding, there is a risk that health inequalities will continue to grow, leading to increased prevalence of chronic diseases and health issues in disadvantaged communities.

7.2 The wider work to overturn cultural barriers to breastfeeding are critical to ensure that future generations of parents are informed and supported to breastfeed, irrespective of their background. Without this, we are likely to continue to see mostly educated, affluent and older mums choosing to breastfeed and access support services.

## **8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 Work to overturn cultural barriers to breastfeeding includes the role of dads/male carers, as they play an important role in encouraging and supporting a woman to breastfeed, which can increase initiation and duration of breastfeeding. Consideration should be made to the role of dads in breastfeeding, as there can be a tendency for dads to be overlooked when a baby is breastfed. Bonding with a new baby

is just as important for dads, but can be more challenging when they are not directly involved with feeding baby. There is a focus on dads through Halton Family Hubs, and there are plans to develop resources for dads around breastfeeding, as well as including boys in the school education workshops through the Healthy Schools programme.

## 9.0 **CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 Breastfeeding offers several environmental benefits that can help mitigate climate change:

- Breastfeeding produces no carbon emissions, unlike the production and transportation of formula, which involves significant energy use and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Breastfeeding eliminates the need for formula packaging, which often ends up in landfills or oceans. This reduces plastic and metal waste.
- Breastfeeding requires minimal water and land resources compared to dairy farming, which is necessary for formula production. Dairy farming is a major consumer of water and contributor to methane emissions.
- Promoting breastfeeding supports a more sustainable food system by reducing the demand for industrially produced milk substitutes.
- Breastfeeding improves health outcomes for mothers and infants, reducing the burden on healthcare systems and enhancing community resilience to climate impacts.

## 10.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

None under the meaning of the Act.