

Empowering communities: A partnership approach to enhancing breastfeeding awareness and culture in low-prevalence socially deprived areas - *Executive Summary*

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Commissioned by Breastfeeding Network, via funding from The Welsh Government, Child Poverty, Innovation and Supporting Communities grant.

May 2025

This report was commissioned by Breastfeeding Network (BfN) as part of the Empowering Communities Initiative, with grant funding under the Child Poverty Strategy Wales. Data collection and analysis was carried out independently by the research team. Views expressed in this report are those of the research team and not necessarily those of BfN and project partners.

The Breastfeeding Network provides independent, evidence-based information and support on infant feeding to women, parents and families. Support is offered through a peer model with over 700 trained peers across England, Scotland and Wales. A key aim is to share the evidence in infant feeding with the families supported. These support services reach women and families both antenatally and after birth and many of the women supported go on to train with the charity to support others in their community. BfN provides the National Breastfeeding Helpline in partnership with the Association of Breastfeeding Mothers, which is funded by the Department of Health and Social Care and Scottish Government. The charity also provides a Drugs in Breastmilk Information Service. BfN works very closely with national partners including UNICEF, Baby Friendly and other charitable organisations and universities. The Breastfeeding Network is a Registered Charity No SC027007. For more details visit www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk

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To cite this document: Hall, K & Brown, A. (2025) Empowering communities: A partnership approach to enhancing breastfeeding awareness and culture in low-prevalence socially deprived areas. A report for the Breastfeeding Network.

Acknowledgements

We thank the parents, health professionals, breastfeeding peer helpers, and organisations who took time to complete their evaluation of the project.

1. Executive summary

1.1. Introduction

The Breastfeeding Network commissioned Swansea University in June 2024 to undertake an evaluation of the Empowering Communities project. Delivered by Breastfeeding Network in partnership with Public Health and Infant Feeding Teams from Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (CTMUHB) and Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) it aimed to increase support for breastfeeding in two areas with high deprivation and low breastfeeding rates. This project was funded by the Welsh Government Child Poverty Innovation and Supporting Communities Fund which aims to enhance the capacity of organisations to form collaborative working arrangements to address child poverty. The aim of this evaluation was to explore the initial set up and early experiences of the project for those delivering it, who attended training or received breastfeeding support.

1.2 Context

The World Health Organisation recommends that babies are exclusive breastfed for the first six months of life, with continued breastfeeding alongside complementary food up until the age of two years and beyond. Breastfeeding helps to protect both infant and maternal health and reduces demand on healthcare services.

However, breastfeeding rates in the UK remain low. Data from the UK wide infant feeding survey found that 81% of babies were breastfed at birth but this declined to 69% at one week and to 55% by six weeks. By six months of age although 34% of babies were breastfed, just one per cent were breastfed exclusively.

This gap is not through a lack of intention to breastfeed; most women want to breastfeed and over 80% of those who stop breastfeeding in the first six weeks are not ready to do so. Breastfeeding rates are also significantly lower in areas of deprivation and women who are younger, have a lower income and level of education are less likely to initiate or continue breastfeeding. These differences are not due to biological reasons. Rather there are complex psychological, cultural and social barriers that lead to many women stopping before they are ready to do so.

Supporting women and families to breastfeed is therefore important. In the UK breastfeeding support is provided by a number of different health professionals and organisations. Midwives, health visitors and specialist infant feeding advisors support families through pregnancy, the postnatal period and early years including with infant feeding support. Breastfeeding and parenting organisations offer additional support to families. These organisations support the increased pressure on breastfeeding support services, often driven by cuts to budgets and staffing. They may work independently, providing volunteer-run or grant-funded local support groups; or be commissioned by local health services to work in partnership. Breastfeeding support across these formats is highly valued by families.

1.3 The current project

The Breastfeeding Network (BfN) is a national charity founded in 1997 to offer independent evidence-based support to breastfeeding women, parents and families. They offer support, information and training to families, health professionals and those whose role may benefit from knowledge around how to support breastfeeding. For this project BfN worked closely with Public Health Wales and Aneurin Bevan and Cwm Taf Morgannwg health boards to increase support for breastfeeding across the regions. This included:

- Integrating support from BfN to build on existing partnerships between local infant feeding teams and public health teams.
- Raise awareness of existing free support including online support including online and Welsh language support.
- Train volunteer Helpers to improve support offer in areas of low prevalence nominated by partner health boards.
- Deliver First Milk Matters training to key people who could support breastfeeding in their roles across the regions

The aim of this evaluation was to explore the initial set up and early experiences of the project for those delivering it, who attended training or received breastfeeding support. This will have important implications for shaping the how the service is delivered the future, by knowing what works and what could be improved.

1.4 Methodology

The evaluation was carried out using online surveys and interviews. Data were collected between January to May 2025 and included:

- Interviews with staff and organisations involved in setting up and delivering the project
- Focus groups and interviews with breastfeeding peer helpers
- Survey feedback from staff who attended First Milk Matters training
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- Survey feedback from mothers/parents who attended breastfeeding support groups
- BFN call data specific to the region for the periods prior to and during the project set up and delivery

1.5 Key findings

Overall, the staff, peer helpers and parents involved in and reached by the project reported a positive experience, describing outcomes that went beyond the initial aims of the Child Poverty Grant. Staff from the two Health Boards enjoyed working with each other, and saw significant benefits from the collaboration with BfN, whose experience of similar projects enabled them to deliver training, services, and awareness-raising activities quickly and effectively. Peer helpers enjoyed their training and saw numerous benefits of their role for families, communities and beyond. Staff who attended First Milk Matters training learned valuable information and ways of supporting breastfeeding in their roles, and parents who were able to attend groups received practical and emotional support that enabled them to continue breastfeeding.

The main challenge for the project was to have a demonstrable impact in the timeframe available, however it was felt by maternity staff and public health teams that substantial foundations had been laid for the ongoing work needed. It is therefore important that ongoing investment is in place to allow the formal structure and support that is vital in terms of managing the groups and deploying the volunteers, to retain engagement and maintain quality and safety. Should the project be extended, this will embed the support further into the community, with the effect of increasing local health professionals' confidence to refer to these groups and the NBH, as well as raising awareness with families

of breastfeeding support available in the region. Staff envisaged future working to include increasing co-production with the community, particularly in the harder-to-reach pockets of deprivation in each area.

Specific highlights included:

Impact upon staff

- Staff from the different organisations felt there was strength in working together, benefitting from each other's knowledge and expertise
- Shared goals and values helped to increase motivation and enthusiasm across health care teams

Impact upon peer helpers

- The training was described as informative and useful, with peer helpers feeling they were well supported during the course and beyond
- Peer helpers valued the friendships and connections they made during training
- Peer helpers described gaining skills that also helped them in their home and work lives, with some going on to undertake further training in healthcare

Impact upon First Milk Matters attendees

- The training was useful and informative and attendees could see how they could use it in their roles
- The training was interesting and enjoyable and the programme engaging

Impact upon parents

- Mothers received numerous different forms of support when they attended groups including practical support with feeding, emotional support and reassurance and connection with other parents
- Mothers felt that the support they received made them feel more confident and enabled them to breastfeed for longer
- Mothers would recommend the support groups to others

Impacts upon breastfeeding culture

- All groups involved in the project felt that the positive influences of the project were helping to make change within the areas. Breastfeeding was becoming more visible and talked about and families realised there was more support available.
- New communities were reached where both breastfeeding and peer support rates were low, enabling more families to receive support in areas where bottle feeding was the norm

Looking forward

- The project shows the early impacts of investment: enhanced collaborative working, increased knowledge and awareness of how to support breastfeeding, and changes to parents' experiences of support and increased confidence to continue breastfeeding.
- It is important that investment is sustainable and longer term. It takes time for breastfeeding interventions to embed, and if successful they often have incremental impacts over time as communities experience changes to how infants are fed.

1.6 Key Conclusions

The project was highly valued by those involved: staff, local organisations, peer helpers and parents. Positive changes were seen to partnership working, the experiences of those who undertook training and the parents who were supported. These changes were both immediate in terms of success of the project and impacts upon knowledge and confidence to breastfeed. However, longer term influences were also at play with a ripple effect of these positive experiences going out into communities to help change entrenched social norms around infant feeding.

Ultimately, this small-scale short-term project achieved this when often much larger projects do not and is an important consideration when reflecting on what works. The All Wales Breastfeeding Action plan seeks to change social norms around infant feeding across Wales. Given the diversity of populations, landscapes and communities across Wales, investment in projects that are designed to meet the needs of the communities they serve such as these is important. Continued investment would therefore enable the full potential of the project to be realised.