

# CALL TO ACTION **STEP 2:** PROTECT AND PROMOTE BREASTFEEDING IN POLICY



## UNICEF UK'S CALL TO ACTION

In 2016 Unicef UK launched a Call to Action, urging all UK Governments to take steps to improve breastfeeding rates by:

1. Developing a **National Infant Feeding Strategy Board**, tasked with creating a strategy and plan to deliver the goal of ensuring more babies are breastfed
2. Including actions to **promote, protect and support breastfeeding in all policy areas** where breastfeeding has an impact
3. Implementing **evidence-based initiatives that support breastfeeding**,

including the Unicef UK Baby Friendly Initiative

4. Protecting the public from harmful commercial interests by **adopting, in full, the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes** and subsequent resolutions ("the Code").

This paper explains **Step 2**: the importance of protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding in all relevant policy areas.

## ADD YOUR VOICE TO THE CAMPAIGN

Despite overwhelming evidence that breastfeeding saves lives and significantly improves health, the UK has some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. We have a deeply embedded cultural attitude that formula feeding is almost as good as breastfeeding and a long history of UK parents facing obstacles to breastfeeding that they cannot overcome. The result is that this is a highly contentious issue that is rarely addressed solely with scientific and factual information, but rather is charged with the emotion of personal experience. All of us are either parents or have family, friends and colleagues who are parents and so there are very

few people who are unaffected or do not have an opinion on breastfeeding.

When developing national and local policies that affect babies, our policy makers, like everyone else, bring with them often powerfully felt cultural attitudes and personal beliefs that can influence their decision making. In addition, an infant feeding industry, predicted to be worth over \$900 million in the UK by 2019, uses its considerable resources to influence policy and policy makers in order to protect and promote their commercial interests, instead of what is in the best interest for our babies, their mothers and families.

## RELEVANT POLICIES

Infant feeding has a profound impact on physical and emotional health and well-being, lasting into adulthood. It should be recognised in a diverse range of policy areas, including:

- Child health: obesity, ear infections, tooth decay, chest infections, gastroenteritis, necrotising enterocolitis (NEC), Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)
- Adult health: obesity, diabetes, cancer
- Emotional attachment and subsequent school readiness
- Mental health including postnatal depression
- Health and social inequality
- Wellbeing in the workplace
- NHS resources
- Environmental sustainability.

The result is that in the UK we have a major public health challenge that is being inadequately addressed with policy making that is neither consistent, nor comprehensive, nor integrated across departments. In some areas, such as maternity and health visiting, policy has been reflecting the evidence for some years and as a result practice has improved and breastfeeding initiation rates have risen. However, in areas beyond basic universal health care, policy largely ignores this issue and so breastfeeding continuation rates remain worryingly low.

For breastfeeding to again become the normal way to feed a baby in the UK, a truly coordinated approach across all services and systems is required. This must not only continue to address

the need for sustained improvement in health services, but also consider the education of children in schools and adults in their workplaces and communities. Policy also needs to reflect the need for better social support so that mothers are again surrounded by people who believe that they can breastfeed and believe that breastfeeding is important. Such policy needs to include national public health campaigns, policies for mothers returning to work and legislation to protect the public from aggressive commercial interests. Local policy should address families' need for one-to-one, face-to-face, predictable and ongoing support from people they trust. In addition, mothers need to be protected, welcomed and supported to breastfeed in public places.

Special attention is needed in policies designed to protect and support the most vulnerable, such as babies born preterm or sick, into the most disadvantaged families, or to mothers suffering with poor mental health, as these are the babies who are least likely to be breastfed, while needing it the most.

Scientific evidence suggests that infant feeding affects many important policy areas, for example obesity, perinatal mental health, cancer prevention, early years development and NHS resourcing (e.g. GP visits and admissions to hospital) and yet this is rarely acknowledged, let alone included in the national policy and guidance addressing these issues.

Unicef UK is therefore calling on all UK governments to take concerted action to promote, protect and support breastfeeding in **all** policy areas where breastfeeding has an impact.

*Breastfeeding needs supportive measures at many levels, including legal and policy directives, social attitudes and values, women's work and employment conditions, and healthcare services. Together these will enable women to breastfeed successfully.*

*Lancet Breastfeeding series, 2016*

## IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE CONVERSATION ADD YOUR VOICE TO THE CAMPAIGN

To read the Call to Action, references and all four papers, visit [unicef.uk/bficaltoaction](https://www.unicef.uk/bficaltoaction)