

UNICEF UK INFOSHEET

THE PROVISION OF INFANT FORMULA AT FOOD BANKS



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Food banks are a relatively new phenomenon in the UK, with charities and volunteers taking an ever-increasing responsibility for supporting struggling individuals and families to provide food and other essential items. This is difficult work, especially when considering the complex needs that some individuals and families face, and we recognise the vital contribution that food banks are making. Struggling families with babies are particularly vulnerable; some food banks have started taking donations of infant formula and distributing this to families in an attempt to support them. While on the surface this can seem like a practical solution, it can be a risky practice that can inadvertently cause harm.

How babies are fed in the early months of life can have a profound effect on their short and long term health, which is why health professionals such as health visitors and midwives are trained to support families to feed their babies as safely as possible depending on individual need and circumstance. Food bank staff cannot be expected to take on this responsibility, particularly for families who are already vulnerable and where the baby may be especially at risk. While people donating infant formula are doing so with the best of intentions, there are numerous different products on the market and there is no guarantee that any donations will be suitable for the babies in need. Such donations also are unable to ensure the consistency of supply that is vital for babies' survival and health.

Whilst recognising that this is a very difficult issue with few easy solutions, in the interests of trying to secure the best possible outcome for the baby we would recommend that:

- Food banks continue to offer families food for the parents and older children to help ease the overall burden on the family. However, we recommend that food banks do not accept donations of infant formula or distribute infant formula for babies. As mentioned above, this is due to concerns for the safety of the baby; there is an array of different products on the market and getting the right one from a food bank cannot be guaranteed. Without information and support from health professionals on hand, babies could be given a milk that is not appropriate to them, for example if the baby is under six months old, a follow-on milk would not be appropriate for them and could cause harm.
- In the event that the family is in urgent need of infant formula, food banks should contact their local health visitor, children's centre or social services for immediate support and information. This should include requesting referrals to more senior staff and if appropriate, to the safeguarding team, if food bank staff / volunteers are concerned that the baby is at serious risk of not being fed.
- Where there is urgent need, and only when working with a local health professional such as a health visitor, a food bank could provide funds to buy an infant formula, but this should only be done when a family is receiving health professional input, where the health professional can ensure that the product is

appropriate and is made up safely, and where a long term support plan for the baby can be put in place.

- In some areas local authorities provide crisis loans or provide vouchers or referrals for essential items such as food or furniture. Information on accessing emergency support can be found at the debt charity Step Change: <https://www.stepchange.org/debt-info/emergency-funding.aspx>
- Food banks are encouraged to tell families in England, Wales and Northern Ireland about the Healthy Start scheme, as this may be able to support the purchase of infant formula or other foods. Pregnant women and families with children under four who are getting income-based benefits and tax credits can apply for support from Healthy Start. The Healthy Start Scheme is not an immediate response but mothers visiting the food banks may be eligible to apply (see below). In Scotland families can apply for support through the Best Start scheme.
- Staff/volunteers working at food banks should have access to local infant feeding support services and know how to refer women to them (see below), in order to ensure that families are supported appropriately.
- Food banks should ensure that donors know that infant formula donations cannot be accepted and include this on websites and in literature about their service. People keen to donate in support of young families should be encouraged to offer other food and drink items that the family can benefit from.

Help for parents who visit food banks

Infant feeding support (for mothers however they feed their baby)

National Infant Feeding Network (NIFN) A network of 800 NHS infant feeding specialists who work to share evidence-based practice around infant feeding and very early childhood development in order to deliver optimum health and wellbeing outcomes for mothers and babies. <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/about/infant-feeding-networks/>

National Breastfeeding Helpline Tel: 0300 100 0212
www.nationalbreastfeedinghelpline.org.uk

Association of Breastfeeding Mothers www.abm.me.uk

The Breastfeeding Network www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk

NCT Infant Feeding Line Tel: 0300 330 0700 www.nct.org.uk

La Leche League Tel: 0345 120 2918 www.laleche.org.uk

Unicef UK Baby Friendly Initiative www.babyfriendly.org.uk

Scottish Government Parent Club <https://www.parentclub.scot/> and Best Start Grant
<https://www.mygov.scot/best-start-grant/>

Healthy Start

Women in England, Wales and Northern Ireland who are at least 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under four years old qualify for the scheme if they or their family get:

- Income Support, or
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, or
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, or

- Child Tax Credit (with a family income of £16,190 or less per year)
- Universal Credit (with a family take home pay of £408 or less per month).

Women also qualify if they are under 18 and pregnant, even if they don't get any of the above benefits or tax credits.

Visit www.healthystart.nhs.uk or call the Healthy Start helpline on 0345 607 6823 for more information about the Healthy Start scheme.

In Scotland, the Best Start Benefit will be available for pregnant women and children up to the age of three years from late summer 2019 and will replace Healthy Start. Information about this will be available at <https://www.mygov.scot/>

Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

- Asylum seeking women are entitled to some additional payments during pregnancy and their child's early years. See the Maternity Action information sheet: [Maternity rights and benefits: Asylum seekers](#)
- Women whose asylum claim has been refused may be entitled to support during their pregnancy. See the Maternity Action information sheet: [Maternity rights and benefits: Refused asylum seekers](#)
- Women who have refugee status are entitled to the same maternity benefits as any other UK resident.
- Women who are nationals of European Union or European Economic Area countries may be entitled to the same maternity benefits as any other UK resident, but this depends on their circumstances. See the Maternity Action information sheet: [Maternity rights and benefits: EU/EEA and Swiss nationals](#)
- Women who are migrants with 'no recourse to public funds' as a condition of their visa (e.g. work visa, spouse visa) may be entitled to some maternity benefits. See the Maternity Action information sheet: [Maternity rights and benefits: No recourse to public funds](#)
- Some women migrants are not entitled to any maternity benefits.

Asylum support <https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/overview>

Provides information on housing and money while waiting to find out if asylum has been granted. State school provision for children and healthcare from the NHS. This includes information on how to apply for short-term support if asylum has been refused.

UK Visas and Immigration Customer Contact Centre on 0300 123 2241
<https://www.gov.uk/contact-ukvi-inside-outside-uk> Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner Email: info@oisc.gov.uk Telephone: 0345 000 0046

The refugee council works with refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK offering practical support and advice throughout the UK. <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/>

Policy Bulletins

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-support-instructions-policy-bulletins>

78: Additional payments to pregnant women and children aged under 3

37: Maternity Payments

Other useful information

Baby Feeding Law Group Information for Food Banks: Supporting pregnant women and families with infants: www.bflg-uk.org