



Maternal & Infant Nutrition Annual Report 2024/25

Public Health and Health Policy

Summary

This report outlines the progress made over the past year in the Maternal and Infant Nutrition Service. Data tells us that NHS Lothian continues to see high overall breastfeeding rates and low drop off when compared to Scottish averages. We know there are significant inequalities in breastfeeding rates between areas in Lothian.

Our goal is to ensure parents, infants and their families are supported in the early days and months to build relationships and feed their babies safely and responsively. We aim to do this by ensuring frontline staff have the knowledge, expertise, and resource to ensure care is effective, inclusive and person-centred. We support this by providing information and training that is evidence based and free from commercial bias, linking with partners and services that share our aims, providing an escalation point for staff queries and patients with significant clinical need and working to support every new mum to breastfeed for as long as they wish.

This report highlights the continued importance of maternal and infant nutrition services and their role in mitigating health inequalities.

Maternal and infant nutrition services are contributing to priorities identified in the national Population Health Framework by reducing the impact of the increasing burden of disease on health services, supporting infant and maternal mental health, contributing to a reduction in environmental harm and supporting children's rights.

Public Health and Health Policy

The Public Health and Health Policy directorate consists of over 150 people working in four divisions.

We work to improve and protect the health of the people of Lothian.



Health Protection

We work to protect the health of the local population from communicable and infectious diseases and environmental hazards.

We do this by:

- Monitoring outbreaks of diseases that spread between people.
- Monitoring environmental hazards (nuclear, biological, radiation, chemical).
- Working with partners including Public Health Scotland, health professionals, Environmental Health, Local Authorities, SEPA, Scottish Water.



Health Care Public Health

We work to maximise the population benefits of health care while reducing inequalities.

We do this by:

- Protecting people from infectious diseases through immunisations.
- Screening/early detection of
 - Breast, bowel and cervical cancer
 - Eye problems caused by diabetes
 - Abdominal aortic aneurysm
 - Pregnancy and newborn
- Pharmaceutical public health programmes
- Dental public health programmes.



Population Health

We work with partners and communities to improve population health and health inequalities by focusing on the social determinants of health.

We do this by:

- Collecting and studying information about the health of our population.
- Focusing on services that support children and young people, create healthy places and build sustainable economies.
- Working with community planning partners, including the NHS, local authorities and the third sector.
- This includes the delivery of the **Maternal and Infant Nutrition** service



Business & Administration

We provide flexible administrative and clerical support across the department.

We do this by:

- Ensuring our department has robust processes and procedures.
- Monitoring workforce performance.
- Administering out of area patient referrals for healthcare.
- Administrative and clerical support to projects and teams.
- Providing health information through the Information Resource Centre.

Introduction and context

Increasing breastfeeding initiation and continuation is an important public health priority. It provides short-term and long-term health, economic and environmental advantages to women, children, families and society.

The United Nations asserts that 'Children have the right to life, survival and development and to the highest attainable standard of health, of which breastfeeding must be considered an integral component'ⁱ. Thus, there must be a focus on promoting and supporting breastfeeding within health services in order to effectively uphold and implement the rights of children.

Following many years of low breastfeeding rates in Scotland when compared with other countries worldwide, the Scottish Government included a quality improvement target for all health board areas to reduce the drop-off rate for breastfeeding by the time babies are six to eight weeks old by 10% by 2025ⁱⁱ. NHS Lothian breastfeeding rates are currently above average (60.2% at 6-8 weeks compared to a Scottish average of 48.5%) and the breastfeeding drop off target was achieved (22.5% in 2023/24 against a target of 25.5% by 2024/25), but there remain stark differences between geographical areas.

Production and distribution of infant formula has a notable environmental impact. Evidence suggests six months exclusive breastfeeding saves an estimated 95-153 kg CO₂ equivalent per baby compared with formula feeding. This equates to all UK breastfed babies saving carbon emissions equivalent to taking between 50,000 and 77,500 cars off the road each year in the UK alone.ⁱⁱⁱ

Realising long term health and wellbeing benefits for all families through milk feeding and beyond.

The Maternal and Infant Nutrition (MIN) service provides non-judgemental education and support for all families, regardless of feeding decisions.

For families who formula feed, there are continued risks from misinformation that conflicts with safe formula preparation advice. The latest Scottish Infant Feeding Survey^{iv} reported that 34% of parents did not always follow safe formula feeding guidelines. Marketing can also detract from responsive feeding, which is recommended to support relationship building, appetite control, reduce over feeding and the risk of obesity, and erroneously associate health benefits with some premium priced brands. The Competitions and Marketing Authority investigation into formula milk pricing found families could save £300 a year by choosing a lower priced brand which offered the same nutritional benefit. It also showed formula milk prices had increased 25% in the last three years and this disproportionately impacted families living on a lower income.

Clear and consistent guidance on introducing solids is also important as research suggests that introduction of solid foods prior to the recommended six months of age is associated with a greater risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes. However up to 54% of families in Scotland expand their infants' diet beyond milk prior to six months. Widespread confusion over what and how to feed young children can lead to nutritional deficiency or risk of childhood obesity, and increasing rates of food insecurity means some parents and carers are less able to make a range of choices and are at risk of not having the means to feed themselves or their family.

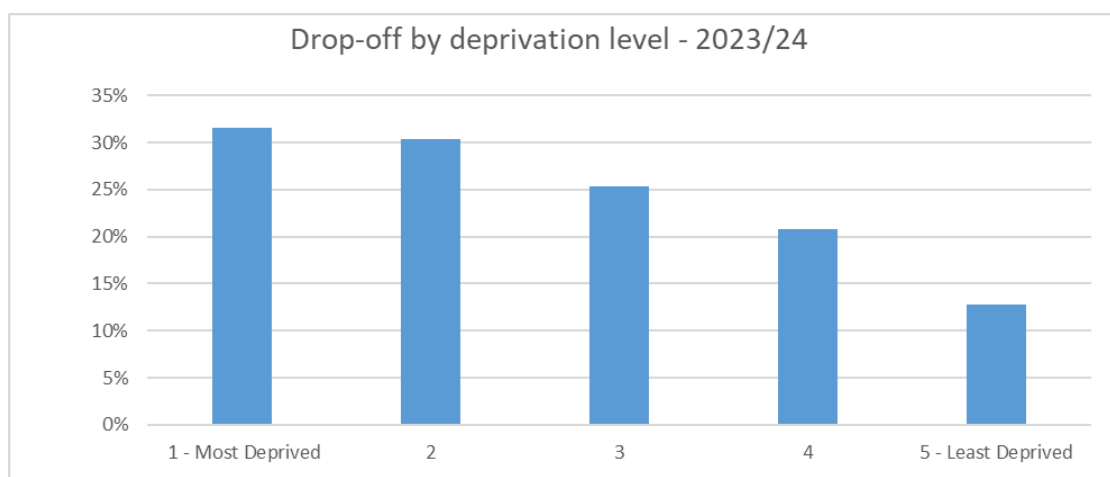
Maternal Nutrition

Poor preconception nutrition, including folic acid and vitamin uptake as well as healthy weight, increases risks for both mother and baby and increases the need for more intensive healthcare services. There is still a lack of robust evidence on how best to improve preconception nutrition, and this continues to pose challenges for all services involved.

Equalities

Who we support

Across Lothian, as is the case throughout Scotland, patterns of both milk feeding and the introduction of solid foods are strongly associated with maternal age, educational status and levels of deprivation. Babies of parents from low-income backgrounds, who are young, white, with fewer educational qualifications and who were themselves formula fed, are least likely to be breastfed. Thus, not being breastfed is both a consequence and a cause of social inequalities and means those who can least afford it are more likely to bear the financial expense of purchasing formula and the associated feeding equipment, and those with the greatest health inequalities also have the greatest exposure to associated health risks. Every year, each board is issued a breastfeeding scorecard based on data collected as part of the maternity and health visiting pathway. These scorecards illustrate breastfeeding data related to many factors including deprivation levels as below.



Work is ongoing in the NHS Lothian MIN service to provide additional targeted support for some communities known to experience greater inequalities. During 2024/25 this included:

- Continuing to expand the Delivering Early Breastfeeding Support (DEBS) project within West Lothian. This now covers 70% of the GP practices in West Lothian and has shown to reduce the inequalities gradient in its target areas (see page 6 for further details).
- Providing support to maternity services to start the process of rationalising the number of formula milk options offered across acute services. MIN led the Equality and Children's Rights Impact Assessment on this work and the subsequent communications to frontline services.

What we achieved this year

1. Working towards UNICEF sustainability

UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) is an evidence-based quality assurance programme that the Scottish Government require each board to deliver. Every three years an independent external audit of policy, staff and service users is undertaken by UNICEF to assess the provision and quality of infant feeding and relationship development services.

In NHS Lothian, the MIN service provides leadership and support to frontline services, supporting and managing the implementation of BFI. The service trains, audits and supports other services to universally deliver expert care in the field of maternal and infant nutrition and to support the development of a strong bond between the parent and their child during the first year of life. The service works with local and national partners to ensure consistent, evidenced best practice and seeks to build community capacity and facilitate cultural change. Additionally, we provide an escalation point accepting referrals to see those experiencing significant clinical difficulties with infant feeding.

There are around 8000 births in NHS Lothian a year. In order to ensure safe, responsive care and feeding for these infants, the service supports approximately:

- 600 midwifery staff
- 340 health visiting team members
- 40 family nurses
- 160 neonatal nurses
- Dietitians and other paediatric and neonatal Allied Health Professionals
- A range of other staff in the mother and baby unit
- Medical staff including ward-based doctors, consultants and GPs

In 2023, NHS Lothian was fully accredited as Baby Friendly across all service areas for the first time. In 2024, health visiting and family nurse services were reaccredited as meeting UNICEF Baby Friendly standards and were presented with their certificate by NHS Lothian's Chief Executive, Caroline Hiscox.



Following this reaccreditation, NHS Lothian health visiting and family nurse services have one year to achieve the BFI Achieving Sustainability standards – also known as Gold. There is an action plan for this work which includes providing training for the UNICEF Baby Friendly Guardians to enable them to support this work. The Guardians are the Chief Executive, Director of Public Health and Health Policy, Executive Director of Nursing, Midwifery and Allied Health Professionals, Associate Director for Midwifery, and the Service Director for Women's and Children's Services.

Implementation of the paediatric standards within the Royal Hospital for Children and Young People as a pilot site continues to progress. The initial planning meeting was chaired by colleagues from UNICEF and attended by staff from the hospital to develop the action plan. Following completion of this first stage, we achieved the standards required to meet UNICEF Certificate of Commitment, which was presented to hospital.



Our progress this year:

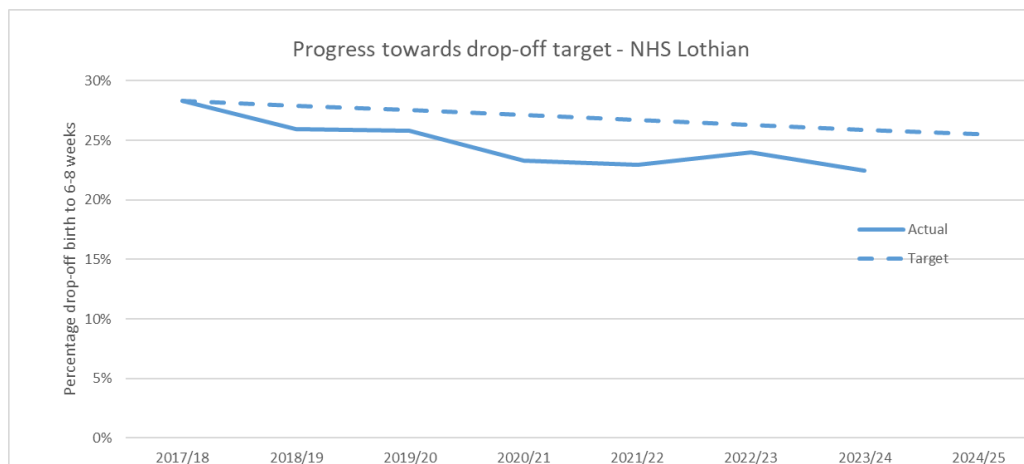
- Achieved UNICEF re-accreditation in NHS Lothian health visiting and family nurse services.
- Developed a project plan for UNICEF Gold standards.
- Trained the Baby Friendly Guardians around the importance of Baby Friendly and their role to support.
- Royal Hospital for Children and Young People achieved a certificate of commitment and staff are working towards achieving stage 1 accreditation.

Future Plans 2025-26:

- Achieve UNICEF sustainability award for Health Visiting and Family Nurse Services
- Achieve reaccreditation of UNICEF in maternity and neonatal services to prepare for achieving sustainability in these services.
- Maintain training and audit levels across all areas of the service
- Roll out management training to clinical nurse managers, chief nurses and midwives
- Embed staff and patient feedback mechanisms

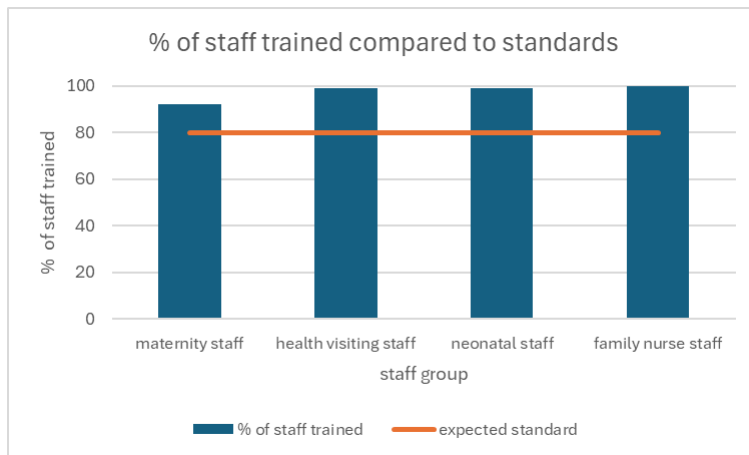
2. Reduce the drop off in breastfeeding rates at 6-8 weeks

A Healthier Future: Scotland's Healthy Weight Delivery Plan set out a stretch aim for each NHS board area to reduce the breastfeeding drop off rate at 6-8 weeks by 10%. The breastfeeding drop off rate shows the percentage of women who start to breastfeed but stop by their 6-8 week Health Visitor review. The graph below illustrates how NHS Lothian achieved the stretch aim.

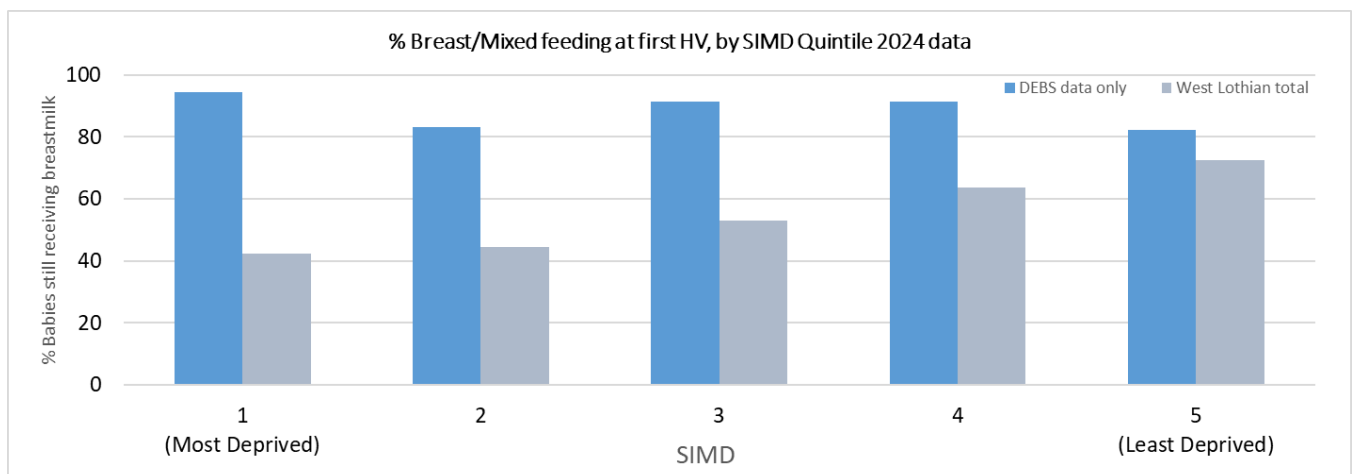


The move towards monitoring drop off rather than overall breastfeeding initiation acknowledges that some mothers make the informed choice to formula feed and should be supported in their decision in addition, the Infant Feeding Survey^{iv} showed 75% of women stopped breastfeeding earlier than they would have liked. The data collected shows the highest rate of drop off occurs whilst midwifery, health visiting, family nurse and /or neonatal services are providing support.

Ensuring staff are trained and confident to support families around feeding is vital to reducing the drop off rate. In Lothian all staff who are involved in providing care during pregnancy and the first year of life attend an initial training course approved by UNICEF. This course is delivered by the NHS or an accredited university. All staff attend a 3-yearly update session. In Lothian the following proportion of staff have attended training.



Recognising that some communities require additional support to improve the breastfeeding drop off rate, the Delivering Early Breastfeeding Support (DEBS) project has been piloted across West Lothian. This project involves a project midwife who delivers proactive breastfeeding support in addition to universal maternity care. This proactive support consists of an antenatal appointment to discuss feeding plans, a visit by the project midwife whilst mum and baby are still in the post-natal ward and follow up telephone calls and text messages for ongoing support until baby is 28 days old. The project now works with families based within 10 GP practices and has supported 1000 women so far. The project outcomes demonstrate that DEBS has greatly reduced the typical SIMD gradient associated with breastfeeding drop off and is an excellent example of how providing additional support can help tackle inequalities.



The Minister for Public Health and Women's Health visited the DEBS project during Breastfeeding Awareness Week in May 2025 to hear directly from families about their experience of this proactive support and the positive impact it had on their breastfeeding journey.

The results of this pilot were instrumental in securing support to expand the project to three additional localities. DEBS will soon launch the project in East Lothian, Midlothian and Edinburgh in areas where the breastfeeding drop off is highest.

Our progress this year:

- Ensuring all staff access UNICEF training to improve support to families.
- Securing funding to expand the DEBS project in other areas of Lothian.

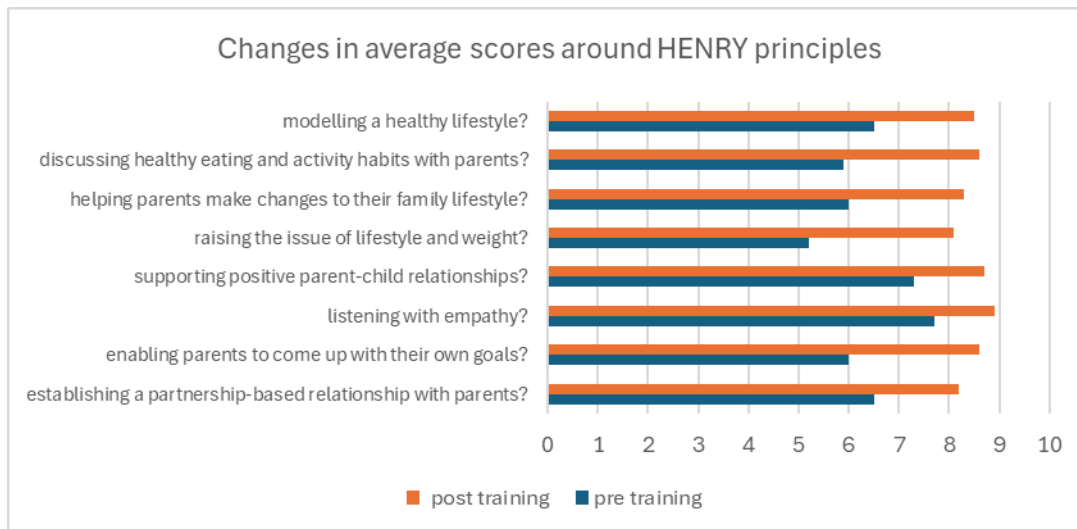
Future Plans 2025-26:

- Establish permanent funding for the West Lothian DEBS project
- Establish the DEBS project in the other local authority areas where drop off rates are highest.

4.Preventing childhood obesity through improved support for weaning, toddler diets and family mealtime behaviours

Early childhood is a critical time for establishing good nutrition and healthy eating habits. Achieving this reduces the likelihood of children becoming overweight or obese in later life. Providing support and education around introducing solids and for healthy family mealtime behaviour during toddlerhood is therefore part of a whole system approach to support the reduction in onset of obesity and type 2 diabetes.

The focus this year was to continue to equip the existing workforce that engages with parents of infants, with the knowledge and confidence to have conversations around family food and nutrition. With the support of the Scottish Government, the delivery of the HENRY (Health Exercise, Nutrition for the Really Young) training scheme and upskilling of community-based family support staff to deliver training, whilst developing our own training workforce has continued. So far, there are 490 staff members from a wide range of organisations trained and there are eight HENRY accredited trainers in Lothian. These trainers have each committed to deliver a minimum of three courses per year to maintain their accreditation. The training process has been externally evaluated and has consistently shown a significant improvement in the knowledge, confidence and skills of participants. The bar chart below shows the changes in confidence of participants who attended in the past year.

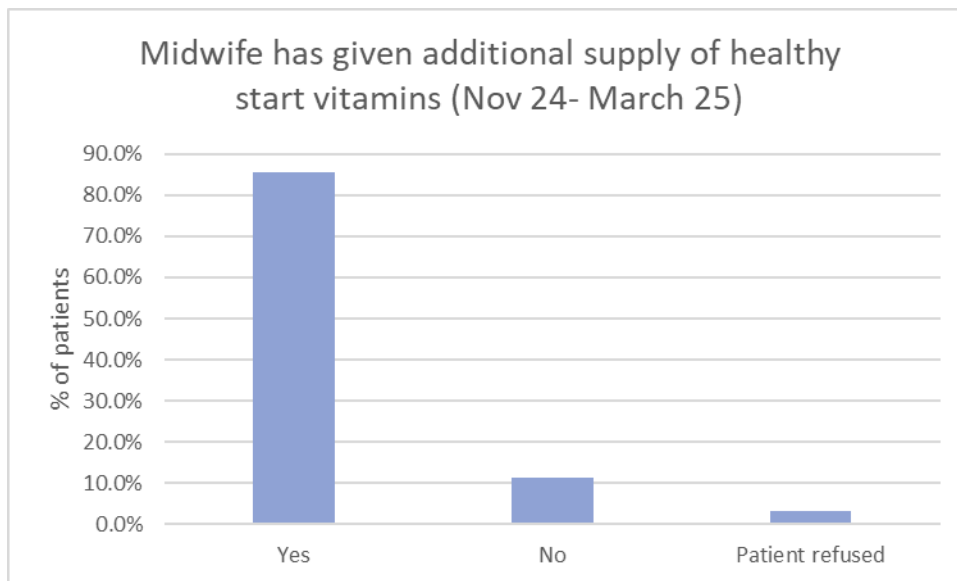


Participants were asked how they would use their learning within the workplace and created the following word cloud with their responses.

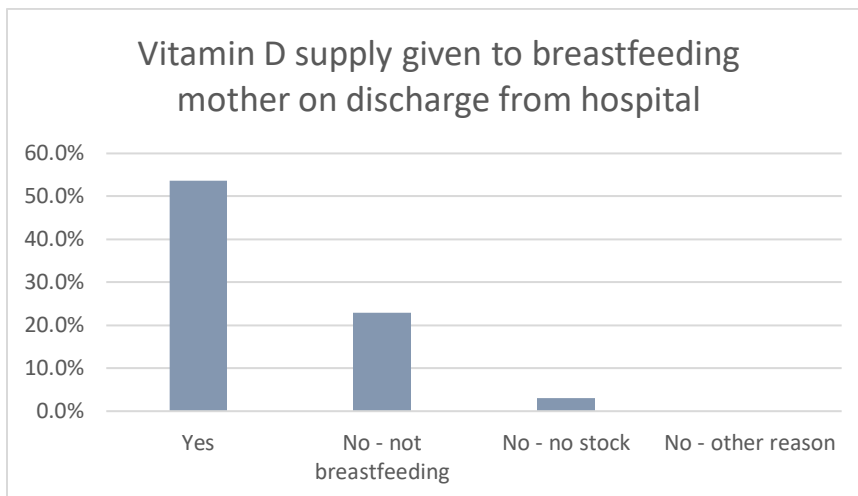


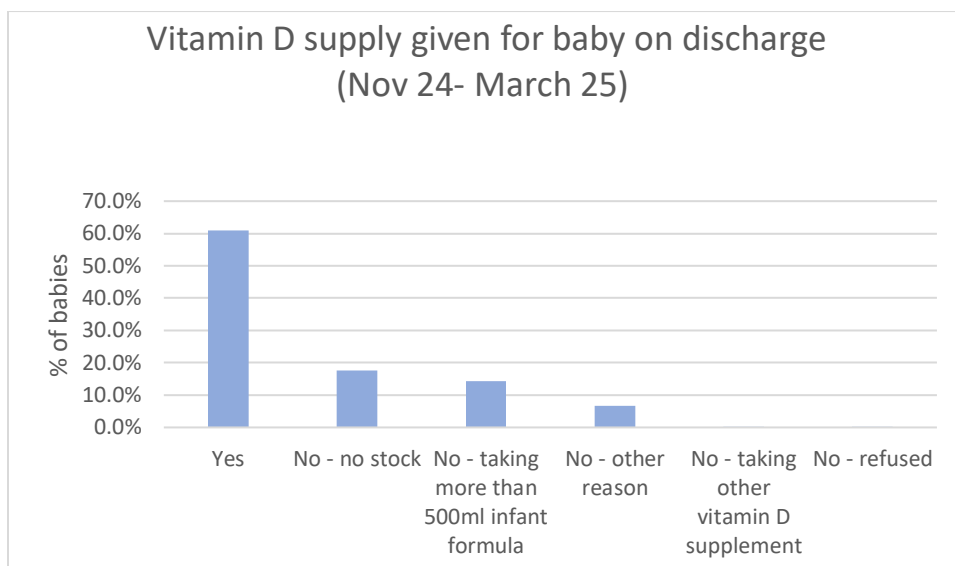
The prevalence of vitamin D deficiency in Scotland is significant (approx. 25% of people are deficient and 1 in 3 people have vitamin D levels that are considered very low). To minimise the potential impact on infants, the Scottish Government established a policy to distribute Healthy Start vitamins to all pregnant women and Vitamin D supplements to breastfeeding mothers and children (up to 3 years) who receive less than 500mls of infant formula milk daily. Whilst administered through universal services, the MIN service has provided leadership to the implementation stage of policy roll out.

Between October 2023 and April 2024, data demonstrates that services are successfully distributing Healthy Start vitamins to the majority of pregnant women at their initial appointment with their midwife (booking appointment).



Breastfeeding mothers and babies are also receiving vitamin D on discharge. Since reviewing the data, the supply pathway to the ward has been changed to improve stock availability on the ward.





Our progress this year:

- Increased the number of staff trained in good conversations around family food and nutrition. Increased the number of HENRY trainers in Lothian.
- Supported families who access Healthy Start and Vitamin D supplementation.

Future Plans 2025-26:

- Establish a programme to further support conversations around healthy food, healthy weight and other support for families.
- Continue to distribute Healthy Start and Vitamin D supplementation in line with Scottish Government policy.

5. Support for parenting including adherence to the WHO code for the marketing of infant milks

The Breastfeeding etc. (Scotland) Act 2005 protects parents' right to milk feed their infant wherever they are entitled to be. It aims to reduce feelings of isolation among parents and support families to feed their baby whilst out and about. The MIN service works to raise awareness of the legal rights surrounding breastfeeding and collaborates with businesses and organisations to ensure they understand their responsibilities. Through the Breastfeeding Friendly Scheme, the service encourages the creation of welcoming environments where breastfeeding parents feel comfortable and welcome to breastfeed.

In line with the other health boards in Scotland all premises that have signed up to the scheme are recognised on the national map ([national database and map](#)).

The table below shows the number of premises currently registered as Breastfeeding Friendly.

Area	NHS	Local Authority	Others (cafes, shops, tourist venues)	Total
East Lothian	21	58	33	112
Edinburgh	91	130	67	288
Midlothian	16	53	29	98
West Lothian	37	144	30	211
Total	165	385	159	709

To ensure families are not pressured to buy breastmilk substitutes whilst in healthcare settings, NHS Lothian implements the World Health Organisation's code on the International Marketing of Breastmilk substitutes. Over the past year, information around how to report a breach has been recirculated to staff.



Our progress this year:

- Registered 317 new NHS Lothian and local authority premises to the Breastfeeding Friendly scheme.
- Continued to increase the number of Breastfeeding Friendly premises in Lothian.

Future Plans 2025-26:

- Develop a Lothian process to support national roll out of Local Authority and early years education Breastfeeding Friendly scheme following the Scottish Government launch of this new initiative.
- Promote NHS Scotland's Breastfeeding Policy and support managers to remove barriers to its implementation.

For further information relating to any of the work described in this report please contact:

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ⁱ [Breastfeeding a matter of human rights, say UN experts, urging action on formula milk - Baby Friendly Initiative](#)

ⁱⁱ [A Healthier Future: Scotland's Diet and Healthy Weight Delivery Plan' \(2018\)](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Environmental cost of formula milk needs global attention, argue scientists | Imperial News | Imperial College London](#)

^{iv} [Scottish Maternal and Infant Nutrition Survey 2017](#)