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THE PROVISION OF INFANT FORMULA AT FOOD BANKS

First published April 2014, last updated November 2020

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. During the Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak, this has come into ever-sharper focus, with food bank staff coping with even larger numbers of individuals and families in crisis. We recognise and admire the vital contribution that food banks are making.

Struggling families with babies are particularly vulnerable and some food banks have started taking donations of infant formula and distributing these 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 and volunteers cannot be expected to assess, plan and put into place the strategies needed to ensure that the short- and long-term needs of babies are met in what can often be complex situations. Additionally, they cannot guarantee timely or consistent supplies of infant formula. However, they can have an important role to play in recognising families in need and making timely and appropriate referrals to the relevant professionals so that families get the holistic and consistent support they need.

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

- All local authorities have a clear pathway for the distribution of infant formula as part of the local authority emergency food provision system. For more information, please see our [guide for local authorities](#).
- Food banks put into place a robust referral system and staff are trained to trigger this if they are concerned that babies are in danger of not being fed.
- If food bank staff are concerned that their local authority does not currently have a robust referral system in place, they contact them to find out what is in place, and if needed, highlight their concerns and agree a pathway of care that includes referral to an appropriate health professional.
- If a food bank is struggling to make an immediate referral, then an emergency payment could be given to the family to enable them to buy their baby's usual infant formula, while the food bank completes the referral process for ongoing support.

- Food banks continue to offer families food for the parents and older children to help ease the overall burden on the family and 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. In addition to concerns about consistency of supply, there is also an array of different products on the market and getting the right one from a food bank cannot be guaranteed. 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.
- 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.
- 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](#).
- Staff/volunteers working at food banks should know how to refer women to the local infant feeding specialist team.
- Food banks should ensure that donors know that infant formula donations are not advised 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 700 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.
- [National Breastfeeding Helpline](#): Tel: 0300 100 0212
- [Association of Breastfeeding Mothers](#)
- [The Breastfeeding Network](#)
- [NCT Infant Feeding Line](#): Tel: 0300 330 0700
- [La Leche League](#): Tel: 0345 120 2918
- [Unicef UK Baby Friendly Initiative](#)
- Scottish Government: [Parent Club](#) and [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 do not get any of the above benefits or tax credits.

Visit [Healthy Start](#) or call the Healthy Start helpline on 0345 607 6823 for more information about the Healthy Start scheme.

In Scotland, the [Best Start scheme](#) is available for pregnant women and children up to the age of three years and has replaced Healthy Start.

Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

[Maternity Action](#)

- Asylum-seeking women are entitled to some additional payments during pregnancy and their child's early years. See Maternity Action's page on [maternity rights and benefits for asylum seekers](#).
- Women whose asylum claim has been refused may be entitled to support during their pregnancy. See Maternity Action's page on [maternity rights and benefits for 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 the 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 Maternity Action's page on [maternity rights and benefits for EEA and Swiss nationals and family members](#).
- 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 Maternity Action's page on [maternity rights and benefits: no recourse to public funds](#).
- Some women migrants are not entitled to any maternity benefits.

[Asylum support](#): 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: Tel:0300 123 2241
- Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner: Email: info@oisc.gov.uk; Tel: 0345 000 0046.

[The Refugee Council](#): Works with refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK offering practical support and advice throughout the UK.

[Policy Bulletins](#)

- Page 78: Additional payments to pregnant women and children aged under 3
- Page 37: Maternity Payments

Other useful information

[Baby Feeding Law Group](#): Information for Food Banks: Supporting pregnant women and families with infants.