

Media statement Sept 26, 2017

The National Committee of the Baby Friendly Health Initiative (BFHI) in Ireland announce it is ceasing its activities.

It is with deep regret that the National Committee of the Baby Friendly Health¹ Initiative (BFHI) in Ireland announce it is ceasing its activities.

Active since 1998 (19 years), the BFHI in Ireland introduced consistent evidenced-based information, practice guidance and quality audits towards implementing and sustaining a breastfeeding supportive environment in maternity services. It also provided an independent² external assessment process for health facilities seeking designation under the WHO/UNICEF Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative.

The model of BFHI in Ireland model has always been an inclusive one, including the global baby-friendly practices³ as sustainable routine practice in all maternity units. The value of the BFHI is recognised in national health policies, strategies and reports for many years.

Until June 2017, approximately 47% of babies were born in Ireland in the ten maternity facilities with current BFHI designation. This percentage was higher than the USA, Canada, Australia, Spain, Germany, France and many other countries. Ireland was closely linked with BFHI activity in over 150 other countries and was recognised as an exemplar programme.

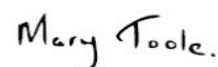
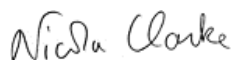
The BFHI National Committee is a voluntary multidisciplinary committee with members from clinical areas and maternity services management as well as representatives of mother to mother support organisations and professional associations. The BFHI National Committee have always been willing to discuss improvement in their activities and functioning.

What happened? Without consultation or notice, in early 2016 the HSE Health Promotion & Improvement, Health & Wellbeing Division reduced the grant-aid it had been providing to the BFHI (which ranged over recent years from slightly under €50,000 to zero). The HSE then directed maternity units not to participate in BFHI activities, ceased all funding, and would not engage in any discussion of these precipitous HSE actions. This was a breach of the HSE grant-aid agreement. For the last 18 months the BFHI National Committee has attempted to engage in open and constructive dialogue with the HSE.

The BFHI had submitted reports each year of their activities, plans and governance, and the HSE had not raised any concerns. An independently evaluated and published survey in March 2017 found that directors of midwifery and clinical midwife specialists in lactation were overall happy with the Initiative as currently run, valued the Initiative, and thought there would be negative effects if it was discontinued.

And now what? The BFHI National Committee worked closely with the network of maternity units in bringing about change to implement the shared purpose of a best start for all babies. We thank hospitals and staff for their commitment to mothers and babies by participating in this global quality Initiative, and for the work of current and past Committee members, assessment team and the coordinator. It is hoped that the learning and experiences from participation in the BFHI activities over the last 19 years will help quality practices to continue and that maternity facilities will implement self-monitoring to ensure the international standards are sustained.

Therefore, despite the BFHI's evidenced value to the maternity services, the actions of the HSE have resulted in the National Committee of the BFHI in Ireland being unable to continue and it now ceases its activity, supports and services.



Maura Lavery, Chairperson Nicola Clarke, Honorary Treasurer Mary Toole, Honorary Secretary
On behalf of the National Committee of the Baby Friendly Health Initiative in Ireland

Notes to media:

1. The title changed from Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative to Baby Friendly Health initiative to allow for expansion of the effective programme into community services as well as maternity, paediatric and whole hospital settings. However when the HSE came into existence this expansion was not facilitated.
2. Practices of the Initiative include appropriately skilled staff, informed parental decisions through the provision of appropriate and accurate discussions, supportive labour and birth practices, early and continued mother-baby contact, and feeding skills, for all babies and their mothers regardless of feeding decisions.
3. The Baby Friendly Health Initiative in Ireland is independent and is not a programme directed by the HSE. The BFHI in Ireland commenced in 1998 as part of the Irish Health Promoting Hospitals Network and is now an independent organisation and meeting the requirements of the Charities Regulatory Authority. This independence avoids the potential bias of the HSE themselves determining and assessing standards in a service delivered by the HSE.

For further information visit www.babyfriendly.ie or <https://www.facebook.com/BFHIinIreland/>