

The Baby Friendly Health Initiative in Ireland (BFHI) is active in Ireland for 19 years providing consistent evidenced-based information, capacity building, support, and monitoring of standards towards assisting health facilities to implement and sustain an environment that routinely provides breastfeeding supportive practices towards lifelong health and wellbeing. It also provides an independent external assessment process for health facilities seeking designation under the WHO/UNICEF Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative. These existing standards and monitoring process can be used as part of related performance indicators and systems.

Maternity units/hospitals in Ireland actively participate in the Initiative. From the start of the BFHI in Ireland as a programme of the Health Promoting Hospitals Network, the BFHI has fostered a collegiate network among maternity services rather than competition. This includes joint work on projects with other hospitals to reduce duplication of work and facilitate consistent practice. Each hospital has a BFHI contact person who is a conduit to receive and share information, who has regular contact with the BFHI National Coordinator to raise questions on implementation of practices or to discuss research evidence. The BFHI National Coordinator also provides general support for the contact person in what may be a lonely position of being a change agent. This collegiate network may also be a conduit for other related programmes and activities.

The Baby Friendly Health Initiative in Ireland (BFHI) is a part of the global programme of the WHO and UNICEF and in a dynamic network sharing research and practice updates. Ireland is closely linked with BFHI activity in over 150 other countries and with programme leads in the WHO and UNICEF which facilitates global information and support rapidly reaching maternity services in Ireland. 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. The title changed from Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative to Health initiative to allow for expansion of the effective programme into community services.

The BFHI in Ireland model has always been an inclusive model including the global baby-friendly practices as sustainable routine practice in all maternity units rather than situating designation as a Baby Friendly Hospital as an optional extra for a few maternity services. The Initiative is much broader than only promoting breastfeeding or increasing breastfeeding rates. Supporting mothers is about helping all mothers to feed their baby the way that they want to, and so that mothers do not have to stop breastfeeding when they want to continue. Practices of the BFHI 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. Many of the practices in the Initiative directly link with other actions of the HSE Breastfeeding Action Plan and practices in the Maternity Strategy.

The Baby Friendly Health Initiative is a support to other quality programmes. The BFHI standards can take many years of work to achieve in a sustainable manner. In the stages along the journey and after designation is achieved, the BFHI in Ireland assists hospitals to have an annual action plan towards implementing, mainstreaming and sustaining good practices. Reports of these actions are included the BFHI Link newsletter and on the public BFHI web site thus highlighting positive activity, reinforcing good practice and facilitating networks between maternity services. Specific baby friendly activities are linked to quality reporting themes and standards so as to reduce the burden of multi-programme activity and reporting and to facilitate quality managers to easily see how these activities help to show evidence the hospital is active in quality audits and improvements.

The BFHI in Ireland collaborates with other organisations and can act as a linkage. The mother to mother breastfeeding support groups are represented on the BFHI governance structure as well as a multidiscipline range of hospital and community healthcare clinicians, managers and researchers. The BFHI led in the development of a National Infant Feeding Policy that helps to ensure standardised care in all maternity and neonatal units and contained all the criteria of the BFHI as the expected standard of care; this policy was later adopted in full by the HSE. The BFHI then developed audit tools to accompany the policy and provided training to the maternity units at the request of the HSE. The BFHI has participated in national breastfeeding strategy development and committees, reviewed and provided submissions to many consultations and programmes, and acts as an advocate for best practices for babies and their parents.

Until July 2017, more babies were born in Irish hospitals with current Baby Friendly designation than in many other countries. Approximately 47% of babies were born in the ten Irish with current Baby Friendly designation. This percentage was higher than the USA, Canada, Australia, Spain, Germany, France and many other countries. (Full list at <http://www.babyfriendly.ie/participatinghospitals.htm>) Actions by the HSE Health Promotion & Improvement, Health & Wellbeing Division in late 2016 and early 2017 resulted in some hospitals no longer meeting the requirements for participation and designation. Thus by July 1, 2017 the overall participation dropped from all of the 19 maternity units/hospitals in Dec 2016 to 14 hospitals, and the number of hospitals with designation as a Baby Friendly Hospital dropped from 10 hospitals (with 47% of births occurring in a designated hospital) to 6 (32%). The national strategies and plans of the DOH/HSE are for 100% of hospital births to be in units with designation as a Baby Friendly Hospital.

The BFHI provides supports and services to maternity units/hospitals so that they can best provide care for the babies and mothers they serve.

A good start for babies and mothers makes a lifelong difference

A Baby Friendly Hospital helps make it happen

For further information

visit www.babyfriendly.ie or <https://www.facebook.com/Baby-Friendly-Health-Initiative-in-Ireland-1548771835153445> or email contact@babyfriendly.ie