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GET BLAENAU GWENT BREASTFEEDING



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University Health Board

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Call to action

#Get Blaenau Gwent Breastfeeding

The Blaenau Gwent Flying Start Programme is leading on a new breastfeeding campaign for 2024, and has developed a comprehensive Action Plan aiming to improve breastfeeding rates and provide support to new mothers. The plan includes a variety of initiatives such as support groups, training for peer counsellors, a team of support workers, and educational resources and will be achievable through the collaboration with key partners working with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council including Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, Public Health Wales, local schools, colleges, businesses and the Voluntary Sector.

The Flying Start programme, funded by the Welsh Government, aims to improve outcomes for children under four and their families in areas of high deprivation. With this ethos and the belief that every child in Wales should receive the best start in life (Wellbeing of Future Generation's act 2015), breastfeeding can enhance this start. It is acknowledged however that this method of feeding may not be every woman's choice and may not be achievable for some. It is imperative that all families have access to sufficient evidence based information to make an informed choice and subsequently that they are supported in whatever choice they make. Breastfeeding has many benefits for both mothers and babies, such as reducing the risk of infections, obesity, and diabetes.

The overarching goal of the campaign: More babies in Blaenau Gwent will be breast-fed, and for longer, and the current inequalities in breastfeeding rates will be reduced. To achieve this, we will implement our local action plan that incorporates a community-focused and systemic strategy. This plan will also enhance the health and care system by integrating with the ABUHB Regional Plan and supporting the objectives of the All Wales Breastfeeding 5 Year Action Plan.

The Blaenau Gwent Flying Start Program, through these strategic connections, will establish a robust infrastructure to promote and bolster breastfeeding among women and families.

Aims

1. Supporting the population of Blaenau Gwent to make informed choices on infant feeding
2. Influencing social norms – towards breastfeeding being seen as the normal way of feeding a baby and accepted as part of everyday life
3. Creating settings and environments which reflect a positive and inclusive ethos towards breastfeeding (e.g. schools, workplaces, public places/transport).

The '**Get Blaenau Gwent Breastfeeding**' campaign was launched in February 2024. To support the campaign, television personality and breastfeeding champion Ferne McCann visited the Flying Start Hub in Cwm, to meet groups of Blaenau Gwent mums and mums-to-be to highlight the benefits of breastfeeding.



Ferne McCann said, 'It was a real pleasure to visit Cwm today to get behind the launch of the Get Blaenau Gwent breast feeding campaign.'

The event marked the start of a yearlong campaign to encourage increased rates of breast feeding in Blaenau Gwent and a strategy for this will be launched in the next couple of months.

The Blaenau Gwent Flying Start breastfeeding campaign is an example of how a comprehensive, tailored and evidence-based approach can enhance the uptake and continuation of breastfeeding in a low-prevalence area, and improve the health and well-being of mothers and babies.

The programme is part of a wider effort to promote and support breastfeeding in Wales, which includes the Baby Friendly Initiative, the National Infant Feeding Network, and the All-Wales Breastfeeding Strategy.



The challenge

We need to increase the breastfeeding rates within Blaenau Gwent. The County Borough is one of the most deprived areas in Wales and have some of the lowest rates of breastfeeding in Wales and Europe.

Breastfeeding is important for the health and development of infants and their mothers, and is linked to the prevention of major health inequalities. The provision of human milk is the most accessible and cost-effective activity available to public health which is known to prevent a range of infectious and non-communicable diseases (NCDs), specifically gastroenteritis, childhood obesity, diabetes type 2 and maternal breast cancer.

Baseline Statistics

For 2023/24, the following data was recorded via Aneurin Bevan University Health Board through the Child Health Records and data collection from the Health Visiting Service in Blaenau Gwent:



Figure 1: Breastfeeding rates within Blaenau Gwent 2023–2024

At birth (first feed)	42.27%
At 10 days after birth	35.57%
At 6 weeks	13.25%
At 6 months	3.8%

This trend suggests that while a sizeable number of mother’s start breastfeeding, the retention rate decreases sharply over time.

Comparing this to Figure 2 below, which shows the average breastfeeding rates in Blaenau Gwent from 2018–2022, we can see a similar pattern of decline over time. However, the starting percentages at birth over the last five years in Blaenau Gwent (average of 43.0%) are slightly higher than the average for 2023–2024. The rates at 10 days and 6 weeks are also higher in the past data, with averages of 32.1% and 14.5%, respectively.

This comparison suggests that there has been a slight decrease in breastfeeding rates in the more recent data (2023–2024) compared to the previous five years. It also highlights the challenge of supporting and increasing breastfeeding rates as time goes on, which the Get Blaenau Gwent Breastfeeding Campaign will focus on to encourage sustained breastfeeding practices.

Figure 2: Breastfeeding rates within Blaenau Gwent 2018–2022

Blaenau Gwent Breastfeeding Rates	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Average over the last 5 years
Birth	45%	44.6%	42.1%	41.8%	40.4%	43.0%
10 days	32.6%	32.5%	32.4%	30.2%	33%	32.1%
6 weeks	16%	13.8%	14%	15.7	13.2%	14.5%

The average breastfeeding rates for Wales in 2023/24 are not yet publicly available. The scheduled statistical release date for the breastfeeding data of 2023 will be in July 2024. However, examining data collected by local health boards in Wales*, it was found that nationally, about 60% of women-initiated breastfeeding at birth in the previous years to 2022/23. This figure typically drops rapidly;

By Day 10, around 35% of women are still breastfeeding,

By 6 weeks approximately 38.7%, and

By 6 months just 16% of women are giving their baby any breast milk at all.

*Data Source – [Statswales.gov.uk](https://stats.wales.gov.uk)

The low rates of breastfeeding reflect a complex set of interrelated factors, such as socio-economic disadvantage, the cost-of-living crisis, negative cultural attitudes, lack of support and confidence, and misinformation about the benefits and practicalities of breastfeeding.

To address these challenge, Blaenau Gwent Flying Start has implemented a robust breastfeeding action plan that aims to encourage and support all mothers of babies born in the borough to breastfeed and give their babies the best start in life.



The programme includes:

- A weekly timetable of local breastfeeding support groups, where mothers can meet other breastfeeding mothers, share experiences, and receive advice and guidance from trained staff and peer counsellors.
- A training programme for breastfeeding peer counsellors, who are mothers who have breastfed or are still breastfeeding and are willing to offer support and information to other mothers. The peer counsellors are available at the support groups, by phone or online, and can also visit mothers at home or in hospital.
- A team of breastfeeding support workers, who are qualified professionals and can provide specialist support to mothers who face difficulties or challenges with breastfeeding, such as baby is not latching on properly, low milk supply or mastitis. The support workers can also refer mothers to other services if needed, such as lactation consultants, tongue-tie clinics or infant feeding specialists.
- Development of a range of resources and materials to raise awareness and educate mothers and families about the benefits and practicalities of breastfeeding through a strong marketing and promotions to include leaflets, social media posts posters, videos, books, and DVDs. The programme will also be collaborating with local schools, colleges, nurseries, community groups and businesses to create a breastfeeding-friendly culture and environment throughout the borough.
- Being part of the UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative to ensure all early year's hubs and healthcare facilities offer an optimal level of care for infant feeding, supporting breastfeeding through a set of standards for all maternity and community services, aiming to increase breastfeeding rates and improve care for all mothers.

- The campaign also aims to increase the awareness and knowledge of breastfeeding among fathers, grandparents, siblings, and other family members, who often play a crucial role in influencing and supporting mothers' feeding decisions.

A Part of the Plan

Blaenau Gwent now offers a specialised breast-feeding support programme run by two antenatal support workers and an infant feeding support worker providing an early intervention programme to help new parents make the right choice for their babies' infant feeding method. Support is locally accessible every day, as well as online and around the clock support via the National Helpline to help mums when breastfeeding gets difficult.

There are four breastfeeding support groups in various locations across the borough to ensure face to face support is available. Breastfeeding peer supporters help mums throughout their breastfeeding journey and make new mothers feel confident and direct them to other services if needed. There are currently six volunteers who have been trained to support new mums, with the plan to train more volunteers throughout the year.

Meet the Team



Catherine Davies
Antenatal Support Worker



Tracey Thompson
Antenatal Support Worker



Kelly Evans
**Responsive Feeding Support
Worker (ABUHB)**

The mothers who received support from the team reported improved breastfeeding outcomes, such as longer duration, fewer problems, and more positive experiences. The team also facilitate a Facebook page which offers information about breastfeeding, shares inspiring and affirming messages and links to media stories, advice, and guidance..

Our campaign journey so far:

A survey on infant feeding was conducted through the Flying Start Facebook page to understand how parents decided on their infant feeding methods, what reasons they had for choosing them, what challenges they faced with breastfeeding and what support systems were available. The results illustrated that the decisions to breastfeed was affected by many factors, such as relatives, friends, healthcare professionals, and individual research and beliefs. Some parents learned about the advantages of breastfeeding from their family members, while others made the choice based on their own research and beliefs. The team also wanted to find out why mums opted for infant formula instead of breastfeeding. According to the survey results, some parents decided to feed their baby with a bottle for several reasons, such as latching problems, medical conditions, convenience, and mental health. Others preferred bottle-feeding to allow their partner to take part in feeding and to enjoy more freedom and flexibility. Some parents also experienced too much pain or pressure from breastfeeding and switched to bottle-feeding for their own well-being. The survey was a key component to help the team debunk any myths and provide more information on the advantages of breastfeeding to promote a better uptake.

To receive the right information at the right time, Antenatal Breastfeeding Workshops are now available in different venues across Blaenau Gwent and are suitable for women who are 32+weeks pregnant and their partner. The workshops cover how breastfeeding works, myth busters, how to get breastfeeding off to a good start, what to expect in the early days, how partners can help and how to access ongoing support.

A team of specialised antenatal and responsive feeding support workers have been set up to provide focused support to not only raise the initial breastfeeding rates in the area, but to motivate mums to breastfeed for longer periods.

Blaenau Gwent offers a timely feeding service that reaches out to mothers within 72 hours of giving birth to provide feeding assistance. The ABUHB (Aneurin Bevan University Health Board) Responsive Feeding service collaborates with Community Midwives and Health Visitors to help parents feed their baby in the first month after leaving the hospital as part of our Blaenau Gwent Early Years Programme. The service also offers face to face advice on how to hold and attach the baby to the breast (for those who are breastfeeding).

The breastfeeding peer supporters are mothers who have breastfed their baby's and have learned how to help others do the same. They encourage, help, and support breastfeeding in their local area. They can offer support on the phone, on the maternity ward, or at a group meeting in person or outside. They can also use home visits, social media, online chat, or email to support.

Mothers who have attended the support groups or received peer counselling to date have reported higher levels of confidence, satisfaction, and empowerment with breastfeeding, and lower levels of stress, anxiety, and isolation.

There is a strong connection between ABUHB Midwifery service and the antenatal mums who need help and intervention, and there is a reliable system for referring them. Antenatal Support Workers also link with the Midwives in antenatal clinic, with the aim of ensuring all pregnant mums in Blaenau Gwent can access the service.

All pregnant mums and their partners can also join an antenatal baby shower, where different professionals can offer support to families expecting a baby. After that, they are invited to a 'welcome to the world' parenting programme.

Several mums have now been trained as Breastfeeding Peer Supporters and are people who have breastfed themselves and will be supporting other mums during their breastfeeding journey.

They encourage, help, and support breastfeeding in their local area, which will include encouraging breastfeeding friendly premises/businesses throughout Blaenau Gwent.

They can offer support on the phone, at a group meeting in person or outside. They can also use home visits, social media, online chat, or email to support, and are a very valued addition to the team.



Blaenau Gwent Breastfeeding Peer Supporters



From left to right – Rachel Cope, Ashleigh Meredith, Lucy Albrow, Jessica Gurner, Catherine Thomas and Rebecca Davies.

Ashley Meredith and Jessica Gurner are also BG Breastfeeding Peer Supporters (No Photos).

All services are available to book onto at www.eventbrite.co.uk/ or alternatively families can be directed to contact the Family Information Services – 08000 32 33 39 or alternatively email: FIS@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

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