

BABIES 2010

4th Year in the running: a quantitative and
qualitative analysis of a local nct breastfeeding service

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Executive summary

This report summarises the results of a small scale, qualitative and quantitative evaluative study of a locally run National Childbirth Trust (nct) breastfeeding support service (BABIES - Breastfeeding And Babies: Information, Encouragement, Support). The service BABIES provides demonstrates how a team of dedicated staff have developed an effective model of service provision to support women to breastfeed their babies. This document is intended to be used by those who provide the service and local service commissioners to reflect on current practice and to consider future service development.

The study shows that:

- BABIES is highly effective at supporting mothers to breastfeed: At the time the survey was undertaken, 61% (n=75) of women reported that they were breastfeeding their baby, and 73.8% (n=90) reported that for a period of time their baby was 100% breastfed. The average length of time a baby was 100% breastfed was just under 4 months. Over 34% of those reporting that they had exclusively breastfed their baby had done so for over 5 months. In total 60.7% (n=74) of the babies were receiving breast milk at the time the survey was undertaken.
- The emotional support provided by the service is highly valued by those who use it. Mothers feel strongly that the support they receive is vital to preventing post-natal depression. Often mothers described as 'invaluable' the support they received as it gave them the strength, resolve and support to carry on through the problems they were experiencing. Key to this success was felt to be the caring and knowledgeable support received from the breastfeeding counsellors who run the service.
- Over all, the overwhelming message from the survey responses was the great value mothers who use the service place upon it – 100% stated they would recommend the service to other mothers.
- Many mothers return to BABIES for support and encouragement when breastfeeding their subsequent babies. The survey results reveal an interesting aspect to the longer term outcomes of the service. Respondents explained that the help they received from BABIES with their first child, not only enabled them to continue to feed their first child, but also subsequent children.
- There are regular visits from trainee midwives, health visitors and community staff nurses who need to fulfil a training requirement of visiting a local community service. However, more work is needed to boost the role of local midwives and health visitors to provide effective breastfeeding advice and appropriate signposting to BABIES.
- Mothers who use the service value being in a room with other women experiencing similar challenges at the same stage of their lives and find that this element adds to their experience of feeling supported.
- BABIES provides a community breastfeeding service in line with Step 10 of the Unicef Baby Feeding Initiative: women who have their babies in the local maternity unit are given a leaflet about the service.

1. Introduction

This report presented the findings from a survey undertaken during 2010 of women who attended the National Childbirth Trust (nct) BABIES breastfeeding support service.

BABIES (Breastfeeding And Babies: Information, Encouragement, Support) has been running for 4 years in the city of Winchester, Hampshire, England. The sessions take place in a local children's centre, and are run by two nct breastfeeding counsellors. The service operates on a drop in basis and is open for 51 weeks a year. Each week there is also a volunteer mum-helper who has herself used the service – she welcomes the mothers to the room, keeps the glasses of water topped up and helps with administration, enabling the counsellors to focus their attention on the feeding concerns of the attending mothers. A pilot of the service was originally funded by the local branch of the nct, prior to BABIES gaining a one-year 'Awards For All grant'. Since May 2008 BABIES has been funded by donations and local fund-raising activities.

The aims and objectives of BABIES are:

- To give support for mothers in their breastfeeding decisions by providing a safe, non-judgemental environment
- To work alongside each mother in the context of her own individual situation and enable her to achieve the outcomes she desires
- To provide a weekly breastfeeding drop-in that mothers from any area can access at any stage of their breastfeeding (or antenatally, if they so wish)
- To normalise breastfeeding and provide support during the transition to motherhood
- To increase women's confidence in the feeding of their babies and help them gain support from the breastfeeding counsellors and from other women who attend BABIES

The purpose of this document is to report the findings of this survey, to reflect on current practice and inform future development of the service.

Methodology

Since May 2007 the BABIES team has distributed a postal survey to all who attended the service in a given time period (usually 1 year). Each year the survey has been developed and changed slightly, but the aim has been broadly similar:

- to gain feed back on the service provided by BABIES; and,
- Gain a better understanding of breastfeeding practice amongst mothers in the Winchester area.

The 2010 survey was no different. In June 2010 a total of 216¹ surveys were sent to all those who attended BABIES for whom contact information was collected. 123 completed surveys were returned 56.9% response rate. All responses were entered into an online version of the survey², and analyses of the quantitative results were undertaken supported by Microsoft Excel. Thematic analysis of qualitative responses provided in the comments boxes was also undertaken. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in appendix 1 and a full transcript of the comments provided by respondents is provided in appendix 2.

About the Authors

Jennie Gavin is a mother of two teenagers. She was a paediatric nurse and health visitor prior to having her family, and in both of those roles she tried to positively support breastfeeding. It was whilst health visiting in Bristol in 1991 that Jennie first

¹ 214 by post, 2 by email as no postal address was provided.

² The online survey software SurveyMonkey was used.

appreciated the need for more support for breastfeeding mothers. This whet her appetite to commence the training provided by nct some years later after practically learning the art of breastfeeding as a mother. She has been a qualified nct Breastfeeding Counsellor since September 1996; she has tutored in breastfeeding for nct for eight years; and, alongside Jane, she has provided training courses for many health professionals in the Winchester area.

Jane Moffett is a mother to 3 daughters and has a background in music. Her interest in and passion for supporting mothers with breastfeeding stems from the support she received whilst struggling as a new mum. She has been an nct breastfeeding counsellor for thirteen years, providing antenatal and postnatal support for breastfeeding in the community. During the last few years, she has heard many eminent researchers and speakers lecture on various aspects of breastfeeding. With Jennie, she launched BABIES in November 2006 in response to local need. As with all nct breastfeeding counsellors, Jane and Jennie both receive supervision and attend regular training to ensure that their knowledge is up to date.

Sarah Thomas draws on her personal and professional experience in supporting the BABIES team to undertake this evaluation. Sarah is mum to a three year old and a nine month old for whom she gained valuable support from BABIES to breastfeed. In her professional life, Sarah works in health research and specialises in undertaking evaluations of complex health interventions and in health research management. For this project, Sarah has developed an online version of the BABIES questionnaire, undertaken qualitative and quantitative data analysis, and led the development of this report.

2. About the mums and their babies

The questionnaire collected general information about the mothers who attended babies during the reporting period. Most of the women using the service were between 31-35 years of age, stated their ethnic origin to be White British. Most of the women attending the service were not members of the nct (59.5%, n=72).

Mothers age range		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
15-20	0.0%	0
21-25	0.8%	1
26-30	17.4%	21
31-35	47.9%	58
36-40	28.9%	35
41-45	5.0%	6
46-50	0.0%	0
answered question		121
skipped question		2

Table 1: Mothers age range

The average age of the babies at the time the survey was undertaken was 7 months, the youngest baby was 1 month old, and the oldest 16 months of age.

Most of the women were educated to a high level with 56.5% (n=65) obtaining a higher education degree or qualification, and 35.7% (n=41) obtaining a postgraduate degree or qualification.

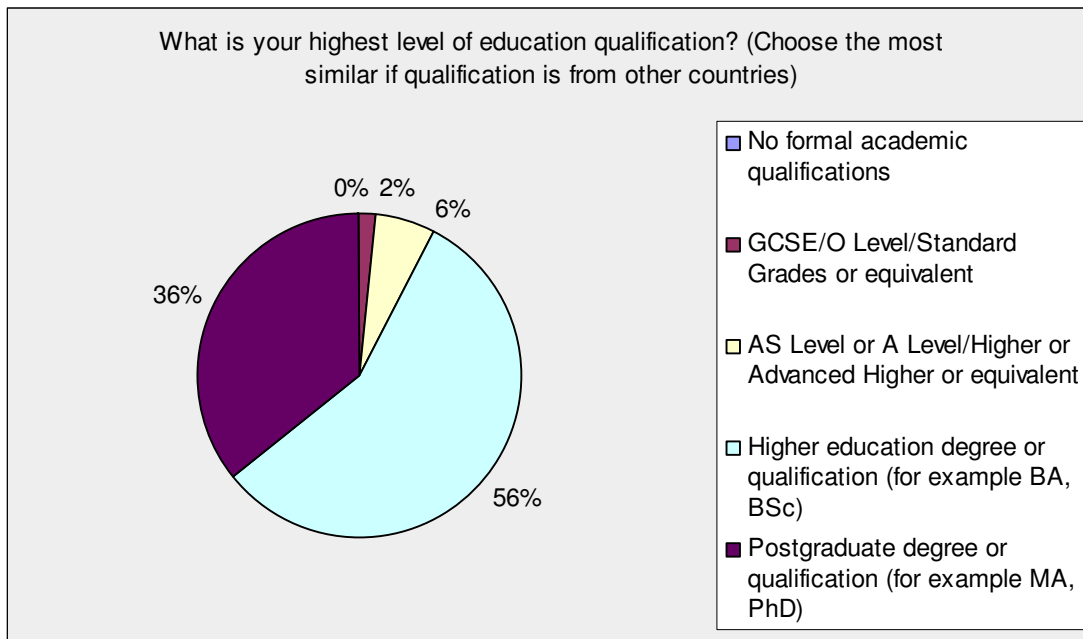


Figure 1: Educational attainment

We were interested to understand a little more about how mothers found out about the service. The survey results demonstrate that women heard about the service from many different sources, although directly from the nct was most commonly cited.

How did you hear about BABIES?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Midwife	14.1%	12
Hospital	18.8%	16
nct	58.8%	50
Health Visitor	18.8%	16
Other (please specify)		51
answered question		85
skipped question		38

Table 2: Communication

Open-ended responses to the survey revealed that word of mouth (e.g. friends) and the passing on of leaflets are also important ways to communicate about the service. It is perhaps disappointing that so few reported hearing about the service from health professionals. Hearing about the service from a trusted source such as a friend, a breastfeeding counsellor in hospital, children’s centre or national breastfeeding support helpline appear to be effective in communicating about the service. Nine women also stated that they had attended the service with a previous baby. Most women using the service, attended once (53.7%, n=65), whilst 44.6% (n=54) of women attended more than once.

How many times did you attend BABIES?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Once	53.7%	65
Twice	19.0%	23
Three or more times	25.6%	31
Can't remember	1.7%	2
answered question		121
skipped question		2

Table 3: Times attended

The comments provided by survey respondents help us to understand a bit more about how and why only one visit to BABIES can be enough to encourage a mother to continue to feed her baby:

"I only went once but was at a point where confidence very low and it gave me encouragement to continue breastfeeding to 8 months." (6 in appendix 2)

"After 3 episodes of mastitis and feeling rock bottom - BABIES was a real help. I honestly do not know if I could have carried on. Only visited once but that allowed me to vent, cry, [and] get advice and solutions. [BABIES] gave me confidence and energy to continue." (50 appendix 2).

3. Why do women use the service, and what do they get out of it?

The questionnaire sought to gather data on the reasons why women attended the service, and whether or not the issues they had were resolved to their satisfaction. Figure 2 demonstrates that the most frequently reported reason for attending the service was sore nipples (55.9%, n=57), followed by concerns regarding low milk supply (30.4%, n=31), poor weight gain (20.6%, n=21) and frequent feeding (20.6%, n=21).

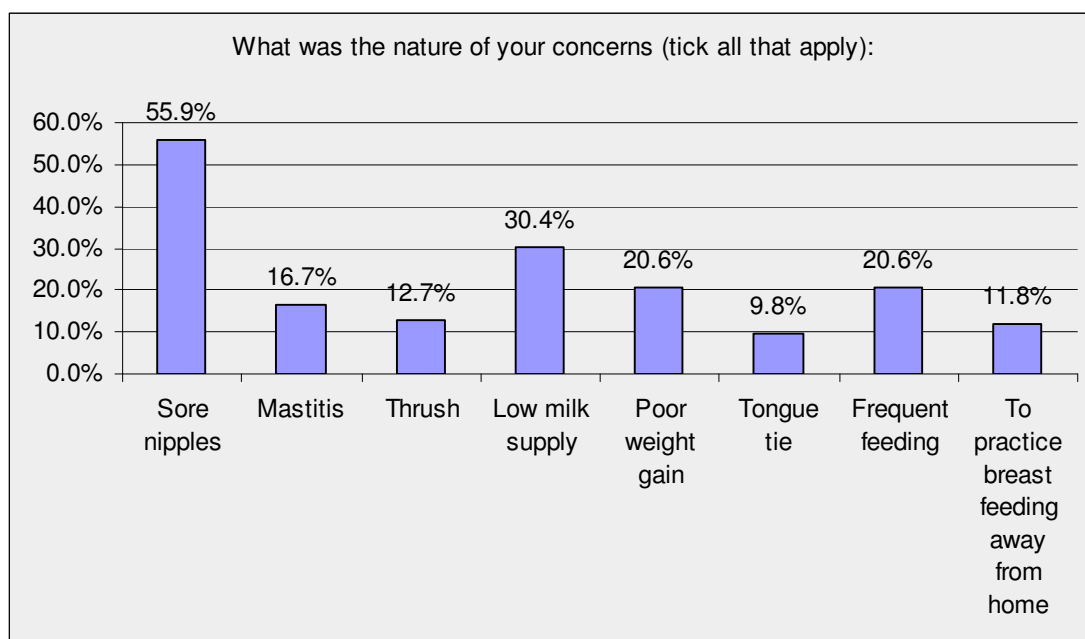


Figure 2: Reasons for attending BABIES

In addition to closed responses, the questionnaire also invited respondees to note any additional reasons for attending the drop in clinic. These responses provide a wealth of information, for some they attended to seek reassurance that they were 'doing it right', many wanted assistance with latching-on, some wanted to gain more knowledge about how breastfeeding works, advice about expressing and storing milk, finding comfortable feeding positions, fast flow of milk and winding, and for general support and guidance. Women attending the service with sore nipples attended the service more often – 76.0% of women with sore nipples attended 3 or more times. And the more times a woman attended the service, the more likely the issues they had were to be resolved. Women who attended less frequently were more likely to report that their issues were only resolved in part. What these responses show us is that women appear to be seeking a wide variety of physical and emotional support from the service. Reassuringly, 60% (n=72) felt that the concerns they had were resolved, and a further 20% (n=24) felt that their concerns were mostly resolved.

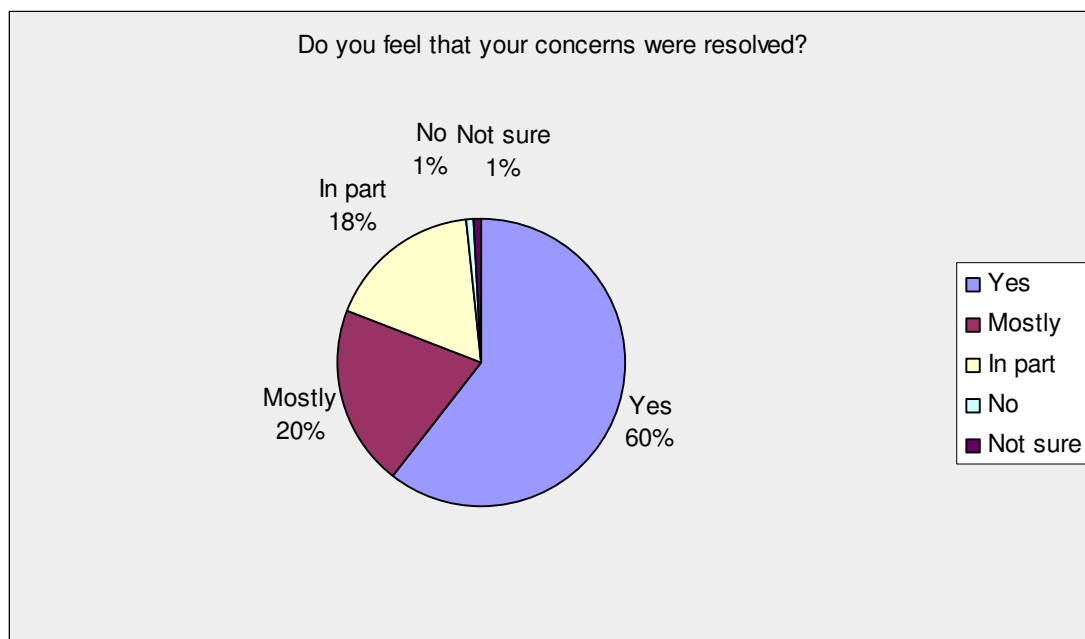


Figure 3: Resolution of problems

The survey results indicate that for some mothers, their concerns were only in part resolved (18%, n=21).

Clearly, BABIES does not operate in a vacuum and, as a result, we were interested to understand more about the sources of support for breastfeeding women.

Apart than attending BABIES, did you receive any other support for breastfeeding your baby? (Please indicate all that apply):

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Partner	60.2%	65
Friends	38.0%	41
Family	27.8%	30
Health visitor	28.7%	31
Midwife	56.5%	61
Books/pamphlets	28.7%	31
Internet	25.9%	28
Other (please state)		30
answered question		108
skipped question		15

Table 4: Sources of support for breastfeeding

Interestingly, partners, Midwives and friends appear to be the most important sources of support. It is perhaps disappointing that Health Visitors were not perceived by more women to be a source of support when breastfeeding their baby. The comments provided by respondents help us to understand more about women's experiences of seeking support to feed their baby:

"I received very little support from the hospital and health visitors and only found out about this group via my own research - I wished I'd gone sooner and not struggled for so long, I might have continued breastfeeding for longer." (9 in appendix 2)

"BABIES is the only guaranteed source of support and help available to Winchester mums. I twice called a midwife about bleeding nipples and they were too busy to come out to see me. Health Professionals are simply too busy to provide breastfeeding support, although I'm sure they are all skilled in the area and wish they had the time." (81 appendix 2)

4. Outcomes

At the time the survey was undertaken, 61% (n=75) reported that they were breastfeeding their baby, and 73.8% (n=90) reported that for a period of time their baby was 100% breastfed. Of those mothers, 82 gave more detailed information about the length of time they exclusively breastfed their baby. These data demonstrate that the average length of time a baby was 100% breastfed was just under 4 months.

Approximately how long was your baby 100% breastfed?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than 1 month	11.0%	9
1-2 months	7.3%	6
2-3 months	23.2%	19
3-4 months	11.0%	9
4-5 months	12.2%	10
5-6 months	14.6%	12
6 months or longer	19.5%	16
answered question		82

Table 6: Length of time of exclusive breastfeeding

The results are very encouraging – over 34% of women supported by BABIES exclusively breastfed their baby for 5 or more months. Nearly a quarter of mothers exclusively breastfeed their babies for 2-3 months (23.3% n=19) and then appear to introduce formula. Further work could be undertaken to understand this dynamic, and the interaction between breastfeeding, formula feeding and introducing solids as time progresses.

Interestingly, as table 5 shows, many of the women who attended BABIES wished that they had continued to breastfeed for longer. What the survey tells us little about is the reasons for this, however some respondees to this question wrote in the margins of the survey that they felt that they had to stop feeding because they were returning to work.

Would you like to have continued breastfeeding for longer?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	50.0%	29
No	24.1%	14
Maybe	25.9%	15
answered question		58
skipped question		65

Table 5: Desire to continue to feed

We asked respondents to provide information on their current feeding patterns. 19.7% (n=24) of babies were being fed only breast milk, whilst an additional 41.0% (n=50) were receiving some breast milk, meaning that in total 60.7% (n=74) of the babies were receiving breast milk at the time the survey was undertaken. On average, babies were 100% breast fed until nearly four months, although the range was very large (approximately 1 week to 13 months).

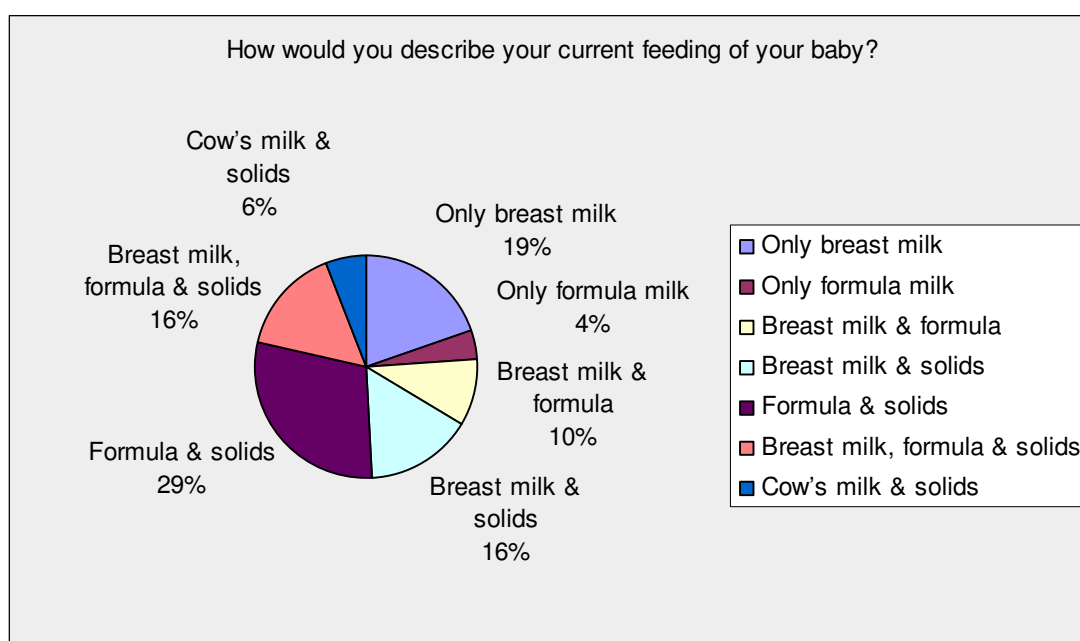


Figure 4: Current feeding patterns

89.3% (n=108) respondents stated that they had expressed milk for their baby.

Over all, the overwhelming message from the survey responses was the great value mothers who use the service place upon it – 100% stated they would recommend the service to other mothers.

Would you recommend BABIES to other mothers?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	100.0%	120
No	0.0%	0
answered question		120
skipped question		3

Table 7: Recommending the service

The comments boxes were filled with thanks, praise and immense gratitude mothers felt for the invaluable support they received from the service. It is a huge credit to those who run the service that it is so highly valued. Beyond this, the comments provided by mothers using the service help us to understand a great deal about how and why the service achieves what it does:

“I think BABIES is essential to support mum's who want to breastfeed. I was determined to breastfeed but the first 8 weeks or so were extremely hard to deal with. The support from BABIES and others were a real "life-saver" in terms of providing support to carry on. Meeting other mums in the same boat was also fantastic.” (11 appendix 2).

“I really struggled to breastfeed my son and found the visits to BABIES a really positive experience which certainly encouraged me to persevere with breastfeeding longer than I would have without the added support. Knowing that moral support and practical, hands on advice was available to me was an absolute godsend.” (15 appendix 2).

“The breastfeeding support team has been really excellent. It really has been invaluable to have somewhere you can go, available every week, for one to one support and advice. As a first time mum it has made a real difference to my confidence and happiness with breastfeeding to be able to drop into the clinic whenever it suits and to be greeted with a smile and a calm, friendly atmosphere to discuss the issues I was having. I really don't know what I would have done without it, certainly worried a lot! I have recommended it to all my friends.” (33 appendix 2).

The service appears to be particularly successful for those mothers determined to feed their baby, but who are finding it hard. The group setting appears to be effective in providing the physical and emotional support they need to persevere. Many respondents explained that ‘just knowing’ the service was there gave them confidence to continue feeding as they had somewhere to go to if they had problems. It is possible that many more mothers who did not actually attend the drop in clinic were also reassured by the availability of the service. This is an aspect that could be explored in future evaluation/research activity. The psychological support offered by the service should not be underestimated. Many respondents used the comments box within the survey to explain the positive impact the service had upon their mental health, as these comments demonstrate:

“BABIES was a life saver for me... If it wasn't for them, I would have probably suffered from depression. Though things didn't work out well for me, the support I received from BABIES kept me going and more important SANE.” (58 appendix 2)

“If it hadn't been for [BABIES] I probably would have stopped breastfeeding my second child because of the problems we had. This would have been a huge disappointment to me, probably giving me post-natal depression, let alone not providing the best nutrition for my baby and helping with the bonding process.” (62 appendix 2)

The survey results reveal an interesting aspect to the longer term outcomes of the service. Many mothers used the comments boxes to explain that the help they received from BABIES with their first child, not only enabled them to continue to feed their first child, but also subsequent children as this mother explained:

“BABIES provides wonderful support for new mothers in a non-threatening environment. The help is always so positive and Jane and Jennie will discuss as much or as little as you want to discuss. For me I have had support from Jennie for two new babies since BABIES began, but also one before it was set up. Each child had their own feeding issues but each time they were so supportive. I genuinely do not believe I could have breastfed all of my children without BABIES.” (48 appendix 2).

“I used Jane and Jennie's support considerably for breastfeeding my first child. This was pre-BABIES but I found their help priceless. Without this support I would have ceased breastfeeding my first and probably not bothered with the second. I have breastfed both my boys for 12 months each and feel I have given them the best start in life as a result.” (53 appendix 2)

What cannot be understated is the importance of the approach and manner of working with mothers the breastfeeding counsellors running the service - it is their knowledge, skill, empathy and care that are vital to the success of the service:

“This is an unbelievably helpful service run by 2 knowledgeable, caring ladies. Just knowing that the help is out there with no query too great or too small is extremely reassuring and I have found it an encouragement to continue with breastfeeding”. (69 appendix 2)

The comments provided by respondents add to our understanding of the role BABIES plays in supporting mothers to continue feeding their babies. Often mothers described as ‘invaluable’ the support they received as it gave them the strength, resolve and support to carry on through the problems they were experiencing. Key to this success was felt to be the caring and knowledgeable support received from the breastfeeding counsellors who run the service. Mothers who use the service value it immensely because they gain the support they need to carry on breastfeeding when it was most difficult for them:

“The support from BABIES... w[as] a real life saver in terms of providing support to carry on [and] and meeting other mums in the same boat” (11 appendix 2).

5. Areas for improvement and development

The survey results suggest a number of areas for improvement and development of the service.

The role of health professionals

Respondents raised their concerns about the ability of health visitors and/or midwives to provide support to breastfeeding mothers:

“Without BABIES I wouldn't have breastfed at all, let alone for 7 months... I was on the verge of giving up when I called [nct Breastfeeding Councillor] who came out to my house... and gave me the confidence to persevere. I attended BABIES several times and with their support I started to express to keep my milk supply up whilst continuing to help [my baby] to try to latch on. Seven months later we are still going and I intend

to carry on until she is 10 months old and I go back to work. Without BABIES [my baby] would have been on Formula at 3 weeks and I would have felt terribly guilty! It is nonsense to suggest that midwives or health visitors have the time to help in the same way” (40 appendix 2).

Reach of the service

Although those women attending the service appear to be relatively homogenous in terms of their educational attainment, age, ethnicity etc, the survey suggests that BABIES is not exclusive – most of those attending are not members of the nct. It is clear that the service is reaching out to others beyond the traditional demographic of nct members, and this is something that could be enhanced in the coming year.

Focusing on encouraging those who are struggling to keep attending

The survey results indicate that for some mothers, their concerns were only in part resolved (18%, n=21); these results may suggest an area for future development of the service. The results of the survey indicate that repeated visits are most likely to lead to problems being resolved. For some women, the issues they have with breastfeeding may well be intractable however, it is perhaps slightly worrying that 18% of women attending the service feel that their concerns were only resolved in part – a useful goal for the service in the coming months and years may well be to focus on trying to reduce this figure. However, a discussion about how best to provide this support may need to take place as there is a need to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to support new attendees alongside those returning.

More advice and support for those who express

One mother told her breastfeeding story (12 appendix 2) and explained that her son’s tongue tie meant that she struggled to breastfeed, and expressed much of his early milk. She attended BABIES and had a good experience, but was felt feeling *“in the middle, not breastfeeding and not formula feeding”*. She went on to explain that there is little information for mothers that express their milk, and feels that BABIES could offer greater information and support to those in similar situations. Given the wide spread practice of expressing revealed by the survey – 89.3% (n=108) of mothers reported that they had expressed milk for their baby – additional guidance and support to undertake this safely may be a useful development to the service.

Consider how partners can be involved

A suggestion was made that it may be helpful to allow partners to attend so they can see how the baby should latch on, so they are better able to help and support (13 appendix 2).

Ensure health professionals understand the service and actively refer women to it

Understanding more about how and where mothers receive information about the service may well be useful. The results of the survey suggest that much more information about the service could be usefully delivered by Midwives, Health Visitors and other health professionals. Consideration should be given as to how to go about enhancing the awareness of health professionals of the service.

Consider how women who successfully establish breastfeeding can be encouraged and supported to continue

It would be useful to understand more about the reasons why women stop breastfeeding their baby, and perhaps to try to address issues/concerns they may have when they have fed their baby themselves for a period of time. The service could usefully consider how to provide a support forum for established breastfeeders. One suggestion could be to establish an online support group.

Reflect on the space and frequency of the service

From a practical perspective, it was noted in the survey that at times the room used by the service can be come very busy and hot, and that parking at the children's centre can be very difficult. Some respondents also noted that the time between clinics can be very long.

Extending our knowledge about why women stop breastfeeding

To enhance our knowledge about the reasons why women stop breastfeeding, one suggestion could be to add an additional question(s) to the survey.