

# Promoting breastfeeding for mothers returning to work

A guide for employers



# Why support mothers to continue breastfeeding on return to work?

There are **business benefits for employers and health benefits for employees.**

Research has shown that the benefits of improving health in the workplace include:

- increased motivation of employees and a better working atmosphere, leading to more flexibility and better communication;
- a reduction in absenteeism and staff turnover;
- increased quality of products and services, more innovation and creativity, and a rise in productivity;
- improved public image of the company, making it more attractive as an employer.

The number of women with babies and small children who return to the workforce is increasing. More mothers are also choosing to continue to breastfeed after returning to work. It is in the employer's best interests to support mothers who want to return to work and continue breastfeeding, as there are benefits for both employers and employees.

# The benefits for employers and employees

## Three good reasons for employers.

### **More economical**

Your organisation will save money as valued employees will return to their job – reducing recruitment, training and temporary staff costs.

### **Less absenteeism**

Breastfeeding helps to protect babies from infections and allergies. This means fewer visits to the doctor and less time off to care for sick children.

### **Better organisational image**

An organisation that supports its employees becomes more attractive as an employer. Mothers will become more productive, happy and loyal.

## Three health benefits for breastfeeding mums.

Breastfeeding mums have a lower risk of:

- breast cancer
- ovarian cancer
- osteoporosis (bone thinning)

Breastfeeding has significant short and long-term health benefits to both mother and child, and the longer breastfeeding continues the stronger the effect on health. This is why the World Health Organization and the Department of Health (DoH) recommend that infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life and that some breastfeeding continues into the second year of life and beyond.

# The legislation affecting mothers at work

By supporting breastfeeding mothers returning to work, you are complying with legislation.

The following pieces of legislation provide protection for breastfeeding women at work.

## 1. *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000*

Any employee who is, or who could in the future be, a new or expectant mother is protected under this legislation. This legislation requires employers to ensure that their workplace risk assessment takes account of any specific risks to the health and safety of expectant or new mothers and that any risks are adequately controlled.

If the mother is breastfeeding, she is responsible for notifying her employer. At this stage the employer should review their workplace risk assessment, taking into consideration any advice from the employee's midwife or GP. If risks are identified, the employer should take any reasonable steps to remove or reduce the risk. If this is not possible, the employer must offer alternatives, eg

- change the employee's work hours
- offer alternative work at the same wage
- offer her a leave of absence from work on paid leave as long as necessary.

**It's not just health and safety legislation that protects breastfeeding mothers at work.**

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) recommends to employers that it is good practice to provide a private, healthy and safe environment for breastfeeding mothers to express and store milk (this is not a legal requirement). To find out more about the HSE recommendations and guidelines visit [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk) to see *A guide for new and expectant mothers who work*.

**2. *The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996***

According to this order, if a woman's normal work is no longer suitable when she is pregnant or breastfeeding, her employer has a duty to offer her suitable and appropriate alternative work if possible. Where it is not possible, the employee may be offered a leave of absence on maternity grounds and has a right to be paid while she is on leave.

**3. *Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976***

This legislation protects employees from suffering less favourable employment terms, opportunities and conditions due to them breastfeeding their babies. If an employer refuses to accommodate a breastfeeding employee, the employer may be considered guilty of sex discrimination.

**4. *Council Directive 92/85/EEC (19 October 1992)*** on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding.

***My boss was very positive. He asked me what support I needed for returning to work and we agreed breaks I would need.***

***Without the support of my boss I wouldn't have been able to go back as early as I had and continue giving my baby breast milk. My employer made me feel like a valued member of staff.***

# Good practice for supporting breastfeeding mothers in the workplace

There are some **easy steps** you can take to **support employees**.

Employers can provide the following to encourage and support mothers returning to work who wish to continue breastfeeding:

## **Support for breastfeeding**

Human resource policies and procedures should encourage an understanding of the value of breastfeeding and a positive attitude to breastfeeding among all staff. For example, as part of the return to work procedure following maternity leave, an employer could offer support for those mothers by accommodating any changes in working patterns or facilities needed. The Public Health Agency has developed a sample policy as a template for businesses. This can be downloaded from [www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/sample-policy-supporting-breastfeeding-employees-0](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/sample-policy-supporting-breastfeeding-employees-0)

## **Information for pregnant employees**

An information pack for pregnant employees which contains a brief summary of the benefits of breastfeeding and an explanation of what support mothers can expect when they return to work would be helpful. This should also include details on how the employee can access this support. Sources of this information can be found at [www.breastfedbabies.org/](http://www.breastfedbabies.org/)

## **Flexible working patterns**

Different or flexible working patterns, such as a temporary change in working conditions or hours of work, should be offered to breastfeeding mothers. For example, employees should not be expected to work shifts or to attend training courses or meetings that would entail excessively long working days, which may make breastfeeding or expressing milk difficult.

**Listening to what employees need will help you find out what you as an employer can do.**

### **Breastfeeding or expressing milk during working hours**

Where practical, employees should be given time off during working hours to breastfeed if their baby is cared for nearby, or to express breast milk. The length and number of such breaks vary, depending on what age the baby is when the mother returns to work. Agreements should be made according to individual need but the following is a rough guide:

- for a 2-6 months old baby, two to four breaks per day may be necessary;
- for a baby of 6 months or older, one to two breaks per day may be needed;
- the breaks should be approximately 20 minutes long.

### **Facilities for breastfeeding mothers**

These should include:

- a clean and warm room/office where the employee can have privacy (the toilet is not a suitable place);
- a clean table or work surface for equipment and pumps;
- a comfortable chair with good back support;
- an electric point for a breast pump, if necessary;
- a wash hand-basin nearby;
- a refrigerator or a cool bag for storing expressed breast milk at 2-4°C until it is taken home.

If it is not possible to devote a room solely to breastfeeding mothers, dual purpose areas (eg first aid room) or a shared facility may offer an alternative solution.

# Case study

## Small to medium enterprises

Lucy works for a company that employs less than 20 people. When she was pregnant she talked to her employer about maternity leave and her line manager asked her to think about what she may need the company to put in place for her returning to work and sustaining breastfeeding.



“

*Having a flexible employer with flexible working hours has been fundamental in being able to continue breastfeeding and in easing the often overwhelming stress of returning to work with a young baby.*

”

# Case study

## Large private sector company

When Shauna returned to work, her employer provided a room to express and during her morning break her mum brought her baby daughter so she could feed her as she was only four months old.



“

*If I took time out to express I worked on the later part of the day... in order to not be away from my baby more than I needed to, I structured my reading and e-mails into my expressing time, therefore not owing time to my employer.*

”

# Case study

## Public sector organisation

Marie went back to work when her baby was six months old and was provided with a room to express in, time to do it and fridge to store milk in, as she had cut feeds down during the day she only needed to express once a day at work.



The Department of Health recognises that breastfeeding and breast milk promotes the health and wellbeing of both mothers and babies. Creating supportive environments for women who are combining breastfeeding and working is in line with the objectives of the *Breastfeeding – A Great Start: A Strategy for Northern Ireland 2013–2023*

# Case study

## Community and voluntary sector

Andrea worked for a youth project and was very well supported when she returned to work. Her baby was one year old when she went back and she needed to working evenings. For the first few weeks back she was permitted to go home to breastfeed the last feed before bed. Andrea believes that this support in the early stages of returning to work gave her the confidence to return to work and because of this support she continued to breastfeed.



“

*As one employer said:*

*We are very happy to support and facilitate staff returning to work while still breastfeeding. This has resulted in very contented members of staff, who are able to manage mothering responsibilities and their return to work.*

”

## Help is at hand

For further information on promoting breastfeeding for mothers returning to work or for information you would like to provide to employees on the benefits of breastfeeding, the following websites are useful:

[www.breastfedbabies.org](http://www.breastfedbabies.org)

[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

[www.lra.org.uk](http://www.lra.org.uk)

[www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)

[www.maternityaction.org.uk](http://www.maternityaction.org.uk)

A sample policy on supporting breastfeeding employees can be downloaded from [www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications)



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