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7  
8 **Availability of breastfeeding peer-support in the UK: a cross-sectional survey**

9  
10 **Abstract**

11  
12 Peer-support is recommended by the World Health Organisation for the initiation and  
13 continuation of breastfeeding, and this recommendation is included in UK guidance. There  
14 is a lack of information about how, when and where breastfeeding peer-support is provided  
15 in the UK. We aimed to generate an overview of how peer-support is delivered in the UK  
16 and to gain an understanding of challenges for implementation. We surveyed all UK Infant  
17 Feeding Coordinators (n=696) who were part of UK based national Infant Feeding Networks,  
18 covering 177 NHS organisations. We received 136 responses (individual response rate  
19 19.5%), covering 102 UK NHS organisations (organisational response rate 58%). We also  
20 searched NHS organisation websites to obtain data on the presence of breastfeeding peer-  
21 support. Breastfeeding peer-support was available in 56% of areas. However, coverage  
22 *within* areas was variable. The provision of training and ongoing supervision, and peer-  
23 supporter roles, varied significantly between services. Around one third of respondents felt

that breastfeeding peer-support services were not well integrated with NHS health services. Financial issues were commonly reported to have a negative impact on service provision. One quarter of respondents stated that breastfeeding peer-support was not accessed by mothers from poorer social backgrounds. Overall, there was marked variation in the provision of peer-support services for breastfeeding in the UK. A more robust evidence-base is urgently needed to inform guidance on the structure and provision of breastfeeding peer-support services.

## **Introduction**

The World Health Organization recommends that infants should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life, with breastfeeding continuing alongside complementary foods until at least two years of age (World Health Organization, 2014). One way in which it is recommended that breastfeeding is supported is through the use of peer-counsellors in the community (World Health Organization, 2015). A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials of breastfeeding peer-support has highlighted heterogeneity within peer-support models (Jolly, Ingram, Khan, et al., 2012). To date, there is a dearth of peer reviewed literature reporting how peer-support is provided in routine practice. Within the USA Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) programme, available to mothers on a low income, a standardised training programme, Loving Support®, was provided. However, there was variation in service delivery including the availability of peer-support, ongoing support provided and intended schedule of

contacts with mothers (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2015). The authors, however, note that programmes delivered across the United States of America have become more homogenous over time, showing the potential for breastfeeding peer-support to become more standardised.

Within the UK, breastfeeding rates are particularly low: less than 1% of mothers exclusively breastfeed for six months, and this is lower among mothers who are younger, less affluent, and of white British ethnicity (McAndrew et al., 2012). The UK body which recommends health treatments to commissioners in England, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), recommends the provision of a peer-support service as part of the strategy to increase breastfeeding rates in the UK. However, it does not specify a model of service provision (NICE, 2008). Little is currently known about how peer-support is provided, or the content and reach of such services in the UK. An understanding of current practice is required to assess what can feasibly be delivered, the challenges for implementation, and to inform service development.

The UK is divided into four nations (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), each of whom has devolved power to deliver health care. To date, there have been three studies that investigated how peer-support was provided in the UK (Britten, Hoddinott, & McInnes, 2006; Dykes, 2005) [self citation, 2013]. These were (i) a synthesis of evaluations of process and acceptability from a range of heterogeneous projects in England which had received government funding in order to increase breastfeeding, including 26 breastfeeding peer-

support projects (Dykes, 2005), (ii) a “multiple case study” comprising all nine breastfeeding peer-support projects operating in Scotland in 2002 (Britten et al., 2006), and (iii) a survey of all NHS Health Boards focusing on breastfeeding peer-support and breastfeeding groups in Wales in 2013 [self citation, 2013]. These reports highlighted heterogeneity within and between UK nations, including the approaches to recruiting peer-supporters, marketing and delivering services and that there was a lack of standardised record keeping. There was significant variation in how peer-support was provided, to whom and in what circumstances, and in the relationship between peer-supporters and health professionals. Reductions in funding as a result of public health being moved outside of the NHS in England and austerity measures (Iacobucci, 2016) may have affected English and Scottish services since these evaluations over a decade ago. Currently, only Welsh and Scottish services have been comprehensively mapped, and there has been no comparable mapping of services provided in England or Northern Ireland.

Research aims:

- (i) To describe the coverage of breastfeeding peer-support services and breastfeeding support groups and how these were provided across the UK
- (ii) to gain an understanding of facilitators and barriers to implementation

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

Our sample comprised infant feeding co-ordinators who were members of one of four national infant feeding co-ordinator networks: (i) the National Infant Feeding Network (serving England); (ii) the Scottish Infant Feeding Adviser Network; (iii) the All Wales Infant Feeding Coordinators Forum; (iv) the Northern Ireland Breastfeeding Coordinators Forum (total n= 696 individuals) within 177 NHS organisations which provided maternity or community maternity services<sup>1</sup>. We believe that the Networks included all individuals who undertook an Infant Feeding Coordinator role in the UK, but also included some other health professionals and academics with an interest in infant feeding.

We raised awareness of this survey to potential respondents at a plenary address at the annual UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative conference (27<sup>th</sup> November 2014), which was attended by the majority of UK infant feeding coordinators. An invitation, which asked infant-feeding coordinators to complete the survey or to pass the link to a colleague if they did not have the appropriate knowledge to answer, was sent to members of the sample via the four Network email distribution lists in December 2014. Follow up emails, thanking those who had already responded and reminding non-responders to take part, were sent to all of those originally contacted one week and 12 days after the original invite.

### *Design and instrument*

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<sup>1</sup> Within England NHS organisations are known as NHS Trusts. Within Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, NHS organisations are known as Health Boards. Within this paper, we use the term NHS organisations to mean both NHS Trusts and Health Boards.

109

110 A cross sectional online survey was supplemented by searches of all NHS organisation  
111 websites. We adapted a pre-existing survey instrument that was developed for an  
112 evaluation of breastfeeding peer-support in Wales [self citation, 2013]. We invited three  
113 infant feeding coordinators from the UK to complete a pilot of the online questionnaire and  
114 provide feedback to us on the process and content of questions, all three took part. In  
115 response to the findings of this pilot we amended our participant information to clarify that  
116 respondents may need access to service level data in order to complete the survey. As all  
117 questions remained the same, data obtained in the pilot phase were included in the main  
118 analysis.

119

120 Respondents completed a questionnaire consisting of a combination of closed and open text  
121 questions. Questions examined how breastfeeding peer-support was organised in the  
122 geographical area for which respondents had responsibility, with a focus on breastfeeding  
123 peer-support and breastfeeding support groups (see Table 1). The chair of the Wales  
124 Research Ethics Committee 3 stated that this survey constituted an audit of current service  
125 provision and did not require ethical approval.

126

127 **[insert table 1 about here]**

128

129 *Data collection*

130

131 Survey data were collected online only, using a purpose built survey hosted on a secure  
132 server at the [name] Trials Unit, [name] University. Respondents viewed an information  
133 sheet and consented to take part in the survey via the online platform prior to taking part in  
134 the study. In addition, we searched all 177 NHS organisation websites during July 2016 to  
135 obtain data on the presence of breastfeeding support groups and breastfeeding peer-  
136 supporters to provide data where we did not receive a response to the survey, and to  
137 validate survey data.

138

#### 139 *Data analysis*

140

141 Descriptive statistics summarising responses were generated from closed questions using  
142 IBM SPSS 20. Open text responses were coded by one researcher thematically facilitated by  
143 NVivo 10. Themes were deductively and inductively generated, and included key areas of  
144 interest already identified by questions (e.g.: training peer-supporters) and new themes,  
145 such as staffing levels and financial issues.

146

#### 147 *Spatial data*

148

149 The map of the UK health service providers was derived from multiple sources. The data for  
150 Wales (Local Health Boards 2015) and England (Primary Care Trusts, 2013) were

downloaded from the Office for National Statistics geoportal (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Data for Scotland (Health boards) were downloaded from the Scottish Spatial Data Infrastructure Metadata Catalogue. Data for Northern Ireland (Health and Social Care Boards) created from boundary data downloaded from the Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland. Data were downloaded as shapefiles and combined using QGIS Essen 2.14.3 (QGIS Development Team, 2016).

## Results

The findings are structured in four sections: 1.) a description of respondents; 2.) the management and delivery of breastfeeding peer-support services; 3.) management and delivery of breastfeeding support groups; 4.) the impact of resources on service delivery.

### *Respondents*

A total of 136 responses with usable data were received (response rate 19.5%), representing 58% of NHS organisations (see table 2). 47 respondents stated that they were Infant Feeding Coordinators, and a further 10 were breastfeeding coordinators, the majority of other respondents had job titles which focused on infant feeding; no responses were received from those reporting to be academics. Within the 136 responses, there were 34 multiple responses within areas, affecting 21 NHS organisations. Seven instances of this

were within England where provision was split between the NHS organisation and another provider, such as the local authority. These multiple responses were retained in the dataset as they provided different perspectives in response to open text questions. Accordingly, all data presented (counts and percentages) are at individual, rather than NHS organisation area, level unless specified.

**[insert table 2 about here]**

The combined findings of the survey and NHS organisation online search showed that breastfeeding peer-support was reported to be available in 99 (56%) NHS organisation areas and breastfeeding support groups in 157 (89%) NHS organisation areas. Neither breastfeeding peer-support nor breastfeeding support groups were available in 5 areas (3%), although informal provision not recorded on NHS organisation websites may have been offered in these areas. There was a high degree of overlap, with 86 (87%) areas which had breastfeeding peer-support also providing breastfeeding support groups. Figure 1 illustrates what breastfeeding support (groups, peer-support, both groups and peer-support or neither groups or peer-support) was provided throughout the UK, with Figure 2 providing a detailed map of London.

**[Insert figure 1 about here]**

193 **[Insert figure 2 about here]**

194  
195 Throughout the rest of this paper, the findings are reported only in relation to survey data,  
196 and do not include information from the online searches.

197  
198 *Breastfeeding peer-support services*

199  
200 Infant feeding co-ordinators were most often involved in managing peer-supporters,  
201 although thirty respondents highlighted that responsibility was shared by more than one  
202 individual, and sometimes voluntary groups were part of a team delivering the service:  
203 “(voluntary organisation 1) and (voluntary organisation 2) are commissioned to deliver peer-  
204 support alongside direction from IFC's” (PID 242). A multi-strategy approach, involving a  
205 range of health and social care professionals and peer-supporters across various locations,  
206 was reported in recruiting new peer-supporters in 89% of responses. Breastfeeding groups  
207 and breastfeeding peer-supporters were most often involved in recruiting new peer-  
208 supporters. The median number of peer-supporters who had been trained in each area  
209 since the service began was 50 (range 1-250), with a median of 15 provided with initial  
210 training over the previous 12 month period (range 0-64).

211  
212 Respondents were asked to describe who provided training in an open text box. The third  
213 sector was the most popular provider for initial training of peer-supporters (including the

214 Breastfeeding Network and the National Childbirth Trust), with Infant Feeding Coordinators,  
215 NHS and community centre staff also playing a leading role. Some respondents (n=45; 33%)  
216 provided further details regarding initial training. Initial training appeared to vary in relation  
217 to content and duration; a minority of respondents stated that their course had been  
218 accredited:

219

220 (name of awarding body) accredited training provided by (children's centre) staff.

221 This is divided into 3 units covering promoting and supporting breastfeeding and  
222 following the principles of the Baby Friendly Initiative<sup>2</sup>. This is Level 1, but peer-  
223 supporters can they continue to Level 2. (PID 387)

224

225 However, some respondents noted that training was not currently being provided: "No  
226 training provided currently but this was the role of a Specialist Health Visitor who has since  
227 left." (PID: 258)

228

229 In addition to initial training, ongoing training or support was reported to be provided by 70  
230 respondents (65%), although 8 respondents (7%) did not know if additional training was  
231 provided. In two thirds of responses where ongoing support was provided (44, 63%) more  
232 than one type of support, such as regular one-to-one meetings with a manager or regular  
233 local training updates, was provided. Some participants described the contents of ongoing  
234 support or training, including: "Regular supervision and ongoing training to maintain the

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<sup>2</sup> Where participants have used abbreviations in their responses, these have been reported in full for clarity.

quality of their work. They also undertake a breastfeeding practical skills assessment and complete additional such as safeguarding.” (PID 387).

However, many respondents provided more vague response including: “ongoing training” (PID 270), “monthly updates” (PID 389), “additional courses” (PID 185) and “mandatory training” (PID 315). Although joint training with health professionals was reported to be available in some areas, it appeared to be more accessible in some organisations than others. There were practices of mandatory joint training in some areas, for example relating to safeguarding, joint seminars with an aim of encouraging shared working in others, “We aim to provide 1 joint seminar (per year) that PSs & HCP's are invited to attend to promote cooperative working” (PID 396) and permission to attend joint training in other areas: “can attend joint training with midwives if they want to come” (PID 343).

**[insert table 3 about here]**

Attending, which was distinct to organising, breastfeeding groups was the main activity peer-supporters were involved in, followed by working on the postnatal ward. In general, delivery seemed to be more focused on group support with one-to-one forms of delivery less common. The majority (n=129, 95%) of respondents reported that more than one activity was undertaken by peer-supporters in their area. In some areas peer-supporters saw mothers both antenatally and postnatally (n=68, 50%), but some saw mothers just postnatally (n=39, 29%), and one respondent reported only antenatal contact. The

comprehensiveness of services was described throughout open text responses, with some areas viewed as having a complete model of service delivery:

The Peer-support Service is a 7 days service 356 days of the year. Team of 10 members, total 7.5 WTE from 9-5 man a 24 telephone support line. The Service is integrated into (child health care), works alongside Health Visitors, School Nurses, and support staff. The service delivers Health Promotion sessions within Primary schools, They provide bedside support within the three feeder hospitals, Provide support groups with Children's Centre Groups. It is an excellent service provided by a dedicated team. (PID 348)

In contrast, some services were not able to provide a comprehensive service, which was attributed to funding: "I have one breastfeeding support worker who is employed by (the NHS), this isn't enough for a birth rate of 2500. We are currently writing a business case for 10 x paid peer-support workers..." (PID, 275)

Although participants were not asked about mothers' views of breastfeeding peer-support, twelve respondents noted that the service was valued by mothers:

those mothers who come into contact with the volunteers have nothing but praise for them and they are wonderful ladies who give a lot of their own time , for free, with no reward, but the joy of helping a new mother breastfeed her baby, they are

wonderful, I only wish we could give them something back. (PID 312)

The majority of respondents (n=67, 63%) felt that peer-support was well integrated with other NHS services, such as midwifery and health visiting services. Where respondents provided an explanation for this, the successful integration was most often attributed to clear guidance on roles and responsibilities (n=15, 11%), shared working practices or locations (n=14, 10%) and a high degree of trust between health professionals and peers (n=9, 7%):

we have information sharing protocol and robust pathways in place, peer-support has become valued due to the length of time it has been in place, staff and mothers value the service case studies etc and evaluation. (PID 267)

The absence of these factors was felt to result in low integration:

Despite countless attempts to explain to (health visiting) staff the roles and responsibilities and limitations of a peer-supporter and inform them of the groups available in each area, there is still a reluctance to advertise and recommend the service. I think as the peer-supporters are not health professionals working as (NHS) employees the Health Visitors do not feel confident of their role in the community and understand what peer-support is about. (PID 231)

301 Peer-support was felt to be accessed by mothers from poorer social backgrounds by  
302 (n=105), 77% of respondents. The majority of these provided an open text response as to  
303 why they felt their service was accessible, including elements such as: support on post-natal  
304 wards, location of groups (including links with children's centres and other community  
305 organisations), one-to-one home visits: "Groups held in in the more hard to reach areas,  
306 mothers from poorer backgrounds receive tailored support and home visits work closely  
307 with Family Nurse Partnership<sup>3</sup>. We have an excellent breastpump loan scheme" (PID 267)

308

309 However, the open text responses to this question made it clear that respondents  
310 considered very different levels of accessibility in their responses. Some participants noted  
311 that breastfeeding groups were provided in areas of deprivation and rated this at the  
312 highest level of accessibility regardless of numbers attending: "We have made sure the BFPS  
313 programmes have been commissioned in the area of greatest need" (PID 289). By contrast,  
314 other respondents noted that peer-support was offered to all on postnatal wards, or that  
315 groups were held in areas of deprivation but offered a lower score:

316

317 I think it is difficult for mums from poorer social backgrounds to access any support  
318 groups. Maybe due to preconceived ideas of what a breastfeeding support group  
319 would be like. I think it also that breastfeeding is less common in poorer social  
320 groups so unlikely they would know anyone or have someone to attend the group  
321 with. (PID 229)

322

---

<sup>3</sup> specialist midwives and nurses for young mothers from deprived areas

323 Barriers to accessibility included lack of attractiveness to women from deprived areas,  
324 inadequate numbers of peer-supporters, being reactive as opposed to proactive, and not  
325 being able to provide home visits. However, elements of good practice in relation to  
326 accessibility were often informal, and thus difficult to evaluate:

327

328 The volunteer peer-support service is targeted , the volunteers are active in areas of  
329 the borough with low initiation and continuation of breastfeeding, from talking to  
330 the volunteers the majority of women access them informally particular women  
331 from poorer social backgrounds , this may be through , social networking,  
332 conversations at the school gate , at the supermarket , at the hairdressers , whilst  
333 the volunteers are attending other groups at the local children's centre with their  
334 children. This information is difficult to capture. (PID 253)

335

### 336 ***Breastfeeding support groups***

337

338 There was variation in the number of groups occurring within each NHS organisation which  
339 did not appear to be associated with the number of births in the area. Respondents stated  
340 that NHS, children's centre staff, and trained peer-supporters most commonly organised  
341 breastfeeding support groups. Breastfeeding support groups reportedly took place in a  
342 broad range of settings including, community venues (café, garden centre café), children's  
343 centres and alongside health visitor (weighing) clinics. It was reported 22 times that some  
344 groups ran as 'baby cafes', 'first friends' or generic 'parenting support groups' with a focus  
345 on breastfeeding, rather than explicitly as breastfeeding support groups. The

346 comprehensiveness of record keeping at breastfeeding groups varied, and this included  
347 reports of variations *within* NHS organisations, as well as *between* organisations.

348

349 ***Financial issues***

350

351 The main theme interwoven throughout the open text responses, was the importance of  
352 financial support for community breastfeeding services. This was often referred to as  
353 problematic, with some services continuing to face a reduction in available funding:

354

355 Funding has been restricted the next course that will be provided is being joint  
356 funded by the local authority and NHS Trust charitable funds. Funding for the future  
357 is not clear and the breastfeeding supporters are looking at running money raising  
358 events to fund future courses. (PID 274)

359

360 Some respondents from England noted that their services had previously been funded  
361 through NHS community budgets and that NHS hospital budgets were not continuing to  
362 fund peer-support services following the move of public health from the NHS to local  
363 government in England:

364

365 (County) has had an extensive programme of Peer-support over the last 8+ years.

366 This was facilitated by (voluntary sector organisation) who received core funding

from Public Health from 2008 - 2013... (County) also had a programme of proactive contact from a Peer-supporter within 72 hours of giving birth in certain localities, funded by DoH. However, this project was discontinued and funding for (voluntary sector organisation) withdrawn, leading to a situation in 2014 where Peer-support numbers are dwindling. Enthusiasm remains high with over 50 PS attending a (voluntary sector organisation) conference in October 2014. (PID 185)

The reported shortfall affected finances to train peer-supporters, to pay them travel expenses, and the resources available to allow health professionals to supervise peer-supporters. In a small number of instances, it was reported that services had been decommissioned. In a minority of areas respondents reported that peer-supporters were paid for their time, but in most services funds were not available to pay peer-supporters. This impacted on the quality of service provision: "It would be wonderful to actually have paid supporters. We have quite a high turnover because they need to get back to paid employment." (PID 283)

Several respondents noted that they were attempting to secure funding from charitable trusts or their own employers by writing business cases, and this was often to provide a basic service (supervisor time, travel expenses for peer-supporters), rather than to pay for peer-supporters' time. Some respondents noted that peer-support services were performing highly when compared against the small financial inputs they received:

We have been re-commissioned by Public Health to train more peer-supporters early

next year and hope to get our training accredited. We work on a VERY small budget (£10K) for each cohort including training, materials and resources and ongoing support. (PID 233)

However, feelings of frustration regarding lack of investment were also apparent:

my feeling is that the peer-support service could be better funded...the acute trust has paid infant feeding support workers working on the wards. The children's centre champions provide this service to some degree however with local efficiency savings their time is stretched with competing priorities. We are basically doing the best that we can with the resources that we have. (PID 253)

By contrast, in a minority of areas it was reported that investment was being made, or remade, in peer-supporter co-ordinator roles in areas with no service.

## **Discussion**

Peer-support for breastfeeding is recommended as part of strategies to increase breastfeeding by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization & UNICEF, 2003), and in the UK by NICE (NICE, 2008). However, the guidance is not clear as to what

‘peer-support for breastfeeding’ should entail. To date, a model of peer-support which is effective in improving breastfeeding rates has not been established within the UK (Jolly, et al., 2012). Unsurprisingly within this context, our UK-wide survey of 136 UK-based infant feeding coordinators supplemented with searching of NHS organisation websites, found wide variation in service provision, consistent with previous audits of UK service provision (Britten et al., 2006; Dykes, 2005) [self citation, 2013]. We identified that peer-supporters were available in 56% of NHS areas, showing that there is a foundation for further development of breastfeeding peer-support in over half of UK NHS organisation areas. However, our survey was aimed at respondents with knowledge of large NHS organisation areas, and respondents noted variation in service *within* those areas. As such, it would be inappropriate to define the presence of some peer-supporter services or breastfeeding groups in an area as the presence of services *throughout* each locality in that area.

Respondents reported variability in training peer-supporters, including the content of courses and the use of joint training with health professionals in some areas and external training provided by the third sector in others. There did not appear to be a uniform standards for training of peer-supporters, or competencies they should attain, across the UK. This is in contrast to provision across WIC agencies in the United States, where a single model of training has been developed, as part of the Loving Support © programme (United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service, 2015), including minimum competencies for peer-supporters. However, despite similarities in training package, provision was still variable across the fifty States involved in the WIC programme, showing that further guidance is needed to provide equitable services. Ongoing training and

supervision for peer-supporters appeared highly variable, and this is likely to have an impact on service quality and delivery.

Our survey provides insight into areas of perceived best practice and also where practice may unhelpfully vary, both of which can therefore inform the development of best practice.

First, regarding integration between peer-support services and NHS health professionals, clear roles and responsibilities, and visibility to health professionals, including through shared working, were found to enhance cohesion. These factors are generally found to increase compliance to local guidelines in healthcare, through the generation of shared understandings regarding roles and boundaries (Lipsky, 2010), and thus clear guidance should be considered in the development of peer-support services. Second, it was clear that whilst the majority of health professionals reported on a likert-like scale that their service was accessible to poorer mothers, there was variation in what that meant in practice, with many services aiming to meet the needs of poorer mothers not attracting them as service users. Further work should be undertaken by breastfeeding services to reach out to mothers from deprived areas, to prevent a further increase in health inequalities (Marmot et al., 2010). Third, breastfeeding support groups and peer-support services were not routinely keeping records of service use. Whilst it may appear at odds with the ethos of mother-to-mother support to keep records, the use of standardised records across the UK would enable effective monitoring of service usage. If this is evidenced, services may be in a stronger position to argue for financial investment in the future.

The most common theme found in open text responses was the challenge of running services with limited financial support, although this was not experienced equally by all services and a minority of services reported recent investment. Linked to this financial shortfall, some services reported challenges of recruiting, training and ongoing supervision for peer-supporters. If the UK is to see an increase in breastfeeding duration, and accordingly to save on health care costs (Renfrew et al., 2012), further investment in establishing the evidence base for effective breastfeeding support services must be made. To date there is no peer-support model that has been found to be effective at increasing breastfeeding within a UK context. However, it may be that the models of peer-support contained within trials that failed to establish efficacy did not provide an adequate dose of peer-support (Jolly et al., 2012). Further research should be undertaken to investigate new models of breastfeeding support, which are theoretically robust and have been developed in conjunction with mothers and health professionals, to ensure acceptability and feasibility of delivery (Craig et al., 2008).

This study is the first attempt to map and describe the provision of peer-support for breastfeeding throughout all four nations of the UK. We received responses from around the UK and achieved a response rate which covered 58% of NHS organisation areas. We supplemented survey data with online searches to enable us to describe the current provision of breastfeeding peer-support and breastfeeding support groups among non-responders to provide a map of coverage across the UK. The survey questions varied between asking for factual information, such as the numbers of groups, and subjective views of provision occurred, such as how accessible services were to women from deprived

backgrounds, and the interpretation of meaning may have varied between respondents. Furthermore, these questions are theoretically susceptible to bias. The survey was open for a period of three weeks in December 2014. We acknowledge that we may have received further responses if the online survey was open for a longer period. We were also made aware that two respondents were unable to access our online survey from their NHS computers. Whilst we provided support which enabled those respondents to take part, it may be that other potential respondents did not contact us and were thus excluded from the survey. Our data provide clear learning about best practice in terms of service design, but these models of more comprehensive training and support for peer-supporters, integration with health professionals and accessibility to poorer mothers have not been tested for effectiveness, and there is thus a limited evidence base on which to guide service development.

To conclude, there was no standardised provision of breastfeeding peer-support around the UK, and services were regularly adapted in line with funding available, rather than number of births or perceived need. Evidence-based guidance is urgently needed to inform the provision of equitable breastfeeding peer-support services.

**Key messages:**

1. Breastfeeding peer-supporters were available in 56% of NHS organisation areas and breastfeeding support groups in 89% of NHS organisation areas. However, areas were often large, and thus within these areas, women may still face issues accessing peer-supporters or breastfeeding support groups.

2. There was considerable variation in the content and service delivery of peer-support services for breastfeeding across the UK.
3. Infant feeding co-ordinators reported that integration between peer-support services and NHS health professionals was increased by clear roles and responsibilities, and visibility to health professionals, including through shared working.
4. Many services aimed to meet the needs of poorer mothers, but did not attract them as service users.
5. Breastfeeding support groups and peer-support services were not routinely keeping records of service use.

#### **Source of Funding:**

#### **Conflict of Interest:**

#### **Contributor statement:**

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Table 1: Overview of survey questions.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-question topics</b>
<b>Demographics</b>	nation; NHS Trust; number of births in area; staff roles; respondent role description <sup>a</sup>
<b>Breastfeeding support groups</b>	number of groups; who organises groups; presence of records on: attendance, support provided, problems with feeding, referrals, other records <sup>a</sup> ; other thoughts on support groups <sup>a</sup> ; funding for non-NHS breastfeeding groups <sup>a</sup>
<b>Training peer supporters</b>	Number of trained peers; what training is provided; who delivers training <sup>a</sup> , additional training for peer supporters <sup>a</sup>
<b>Peer support</b>	Recruitment of new peers; supervision of peers; activities peer supporters are engaged in; integration of peer support with NHS services <sup>a</sup> ; accessibility of peer support for mothers from poorer backgrounds*; other thoughts on peer support <sup>a</sup>
<b>Other non-NHS support for breastfeeding</b>	Details of support available; provider of support; third sector activities; presence of active breastfeeding counsellors.

<sup>a</sup> denotes an open text question was asked, either alongside a closed question or following a question on a related topic.

**Table 2: Sample and response rate**

	Nation	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	Total
<b>Individual level</b>						
<b>Individual invitations</b>		617	40	19	20	696
<b>Individual responses</b>		113	11	8	4	136
<b>NHS Trust level<sup>a</sup></b>						
<b>NHS Trusts in sample</b>		151	14	7	5	177
<b>NHS Trusts responses (% of Trusts invited)</b>		68 (45%)	9 (64%)	7 (100%)	2 (40%)	86 (49%)
<b>Number of additional Trusts covered by non-NHS responses</b>		16 (11%)	-	-	-	16 (9%)
<b>Total response within NHS Trust areas</b>		84 (56%) <sup>a</sup>	9 (64%)	7 (100%)	2 (40%)	102 (58%)

<sup>a</sup> Nine participants from England did not indicate which NHS Trust their response related to.

**Table 3: descriptive statistics**

Topic area Question	Closed text response options	Yes (%)
<b>Breastfeeding peer support services</b>		
Is there a breastfeeding peer support service in your area? (n=118)	-	109 (92%)
Who has responsibility for managing (or supporting) peer supporters? (tick all that apply) (n=109)	Infant feeding co-ordinator	48 (44%)
	Local health professional	36 (33%)
	Other	65 (60%)
How are new peer supporters recruited in your area? (tick all that apply) (n=103)	At breastfeeding groups	79 (77%)
	By local midwives	45 (44%)
	By local health visitors	69 (67%)
	By local children's centre staff	68 (66%)
	By local peer supporters	76 (74%)
	other	32 (31%)
Do you know who provides training for the peer-supporters? (n=109)	-	108 (99%)
Is there any additional training (beyond initial training) provided for peer-supporters? (n=107)	-	70 (65%)
What way are peer supporters supported? (tick all that apply) (n=106)	regular local training updates	69 (65%)
	other training updates	34 (32%)
	attending external conferences	40 (38%)
	regular one-to-one meetings with manager	45 (42%)
	regular group updates with manager	51 (48%)
	Other	0 (0%)
	None of these	4 (4%)

**What activities are peer supporters in your area engaged in? (tick all that apply) (n=105)**

Don't know	8 (8%)
attending breastfeeding groups	97 (92%)
organising breastfeeding groups	45 (43%)
home visits to support mothers	43 (41%)
hospital visits to support mothers	56 (53%)
Antenatal clinic visits	34 (32%)
attending 'preparation for parenthood sessions;	57 (54%)
work on the postnatal ward	71 (68%)
work in a community setting	60 (57%)
Other	15 (14%)

**Do you think that breastfeeding peer support provided in your area is well integrated with the breastfeeding support work that health professionals do? (n=107)**

<b>Not at all well integrated</b>	<b>7 (6%)</b>
not well integrated	12 (11%)
somewhat not	21 (20%)
somewhat well	22 (21%)
well integrated	29 (27%)
Very well integrated	16 (15%)

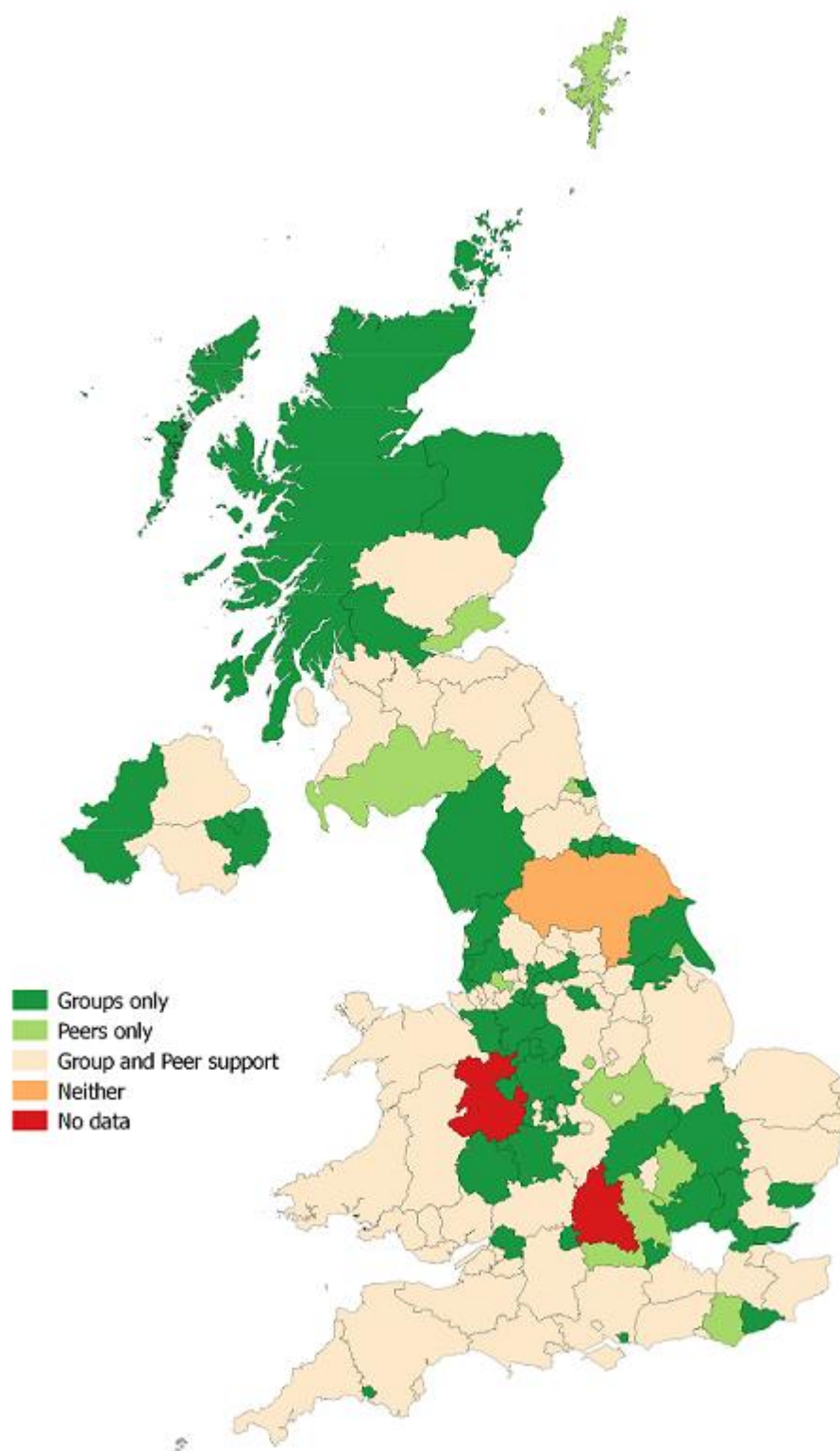
**Is the breastfeeding peer support provided in your area accessible to breastfeeding mothers from poorer social backgrounds? (n=107)**

Not accessed	2 (2%)
moderately not accessed	6 (6%)
somewhat not accessed	17 (16%)
somewhat accessed	22 (21%)
moderately accessed	17 (16%)
Readily accessed	43 (40%)

**Breastfeeding peer support groups**

<b>Are there any breastfeeding groups in your area? (n=128)</b>	-	124 (97%)
<b>If you have peer support groups, how many groups are currently running? (n=121)</b>	1-3	13 (11%)
	4-7	35 (29%)
	8-10	24 (20%)
	>10	49 (40%)
<b>Are registers of attendees kept at breastfeeding groups in your area? (n=123)</b>	-	92 (75%)
<b>Are notes on individual mothers who have problems kept at breastfeeding groups in your area? (n=118)</b>	-	34 (29%)
<b>Are notes on individual mothers who receive support kept at breastfeeding groups in your area? (n=117)</b>	-	31 (26%)
<b>Are notes on individual mothers who are referred elsewhere for additional support kept at breastfeeding groups in your area? (n=117)</b>	-	32 (27%)
<b>Other</b>		
<b>Has there been a review, evaluation or report of the breastfeeding support service in your area in the past five years? (n=107)</b>	-	66 (62%)
<b>Are there lay/voluntary breastfeeding groups in your area which are not funded by the NHS or Local Authority? (n=115)</b>	-	62 (54%)
<b>Are there breastfeeding counsellors that regularly receive referrals from health professionals in your area? (n=68)</b>	-	31 (46%)

**Figure 1: The presence of breastfeeding support groups and breastfeeding peer supporters in the UK**



**Figure 2: The presence of breastfeeding support groups and breastfeeding peer supporters in London, UK**

