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**CONFERENCE ABSTRACT****The HSE Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016 – 2021**17<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Integrated Care, Dublin, 08-10 May 2017

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**Introduction:** Breastfeeding is the biologically normal feeding method for infants and young children and ensures optimum growth and development. The World Health Organisation recommends that all children are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life and from six months to two years of age, mothers are recommended to continue breastfeeding, in combination with suitable complementary foods. Ireland has the lowest rate of breastfeeding in Europe, with a rate of ever breastfed at 57% (2016). Almost 38,000 of 66,000 babies born in Ireland annually are not breastfed. Breastfeeding contributes to improved health outcomes for mothers and babies, including reduced infection rates in babies; with fewer hospitalisations, and reduced rates of cancer in mothers.

**Policy Context:** The need to increase breastfeeding rates in Ireland has been identified in a number of recent national strategies and policies, including 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures', 'Healthy Ireland in the Health Services' and 'A Healthy Weight for Ireland', and 'Creating a Better Future Together; National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026'.

**Targeted Population:** Although breastfeeding initiation rates in Ireland have risen in recent years, our breastfeeding rates remain low and 3 months the rate is 38%. There are marked socioeconomic variations in breastfeeding rates, with higher rates mothers in 'higher professional' and 'skilled manual workers' (63%) socio-economic groups. Breastfeeding is least common among 'unemployed' mothers (27%). There are also geographical variations in breastfeeding rates, with the lowest rates reported in the most deprived counties; Limerick and Donegal.

**International Evidence:** There is substantial evidence to show that education, counselling and support have a major role to play in the promotion of breastfeeding, both in the antenatal period and the extended postnatal period. According to a Cochrane review by Renfrew et al, 'all women should be offered support to breastfeed their babies to increase the duration and exclusivity of breastfeeding. Healthcare settings should provide such trained support as standard.'

**Highlights:** The HSE Breastfeeding Action Plan 2016 – 2021 sets out the priority areas to be addressed over the next 5 years, to improve breastfeeding supports, to enable more Irish mothers to breastfeed and to improve health outcomes for mothers and children in Ireland. The Action plan outlines the actions needed to enhance breastfeeding rates and provide skilled

support to mothers, through our maternity services, hospitals, primary care services and in partnership with voluntary breastfeeding organisations and other stakeholders. The actions include the implementation of policies at hospital and community level; investment in breastfeeding training and skills development for healthcare staff; the provision of additional lactation specialist posts (CMS / CNS Lactation); and partnership working to promote a culture that accepts and supports breastfeeding.

**This will be achieved through:**

Improved governance and health service structures

Breastfeeding training and skills development

Health service policies and practices

Support at all stages of the breastfeeding continuum

Research, monitoring and evaluation

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**Keywords:** breastfeeding; plan

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