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# Understanding lived experiences of low-income UK parents and carers (of infants aged 0-6 months) management of infant feeding in the context of the current cost of living crisis: The DIO Food Project

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# Background

- UK Maternal and infant food insecurity is poorly characterised and understood.
- The first 1000 days of life have been recognised as a critical period in child development with lifelong impact on health and wellbeing<sup>1,2</sup> and good nutrition is essential<sup>3</sup>.
- 'Exclusive breastfeeding, without any additional food or fluids, not even water' is recommended for infants aged 0-6 months<sup>4</sup>.
- Breastfeeding can be challenging and for families choosing to bottle feed, infant formula is expensive<sup>5</sup>
- Formula is often not provided by food banks, due to UNICEF guidelines<sup>6</sup> and formula milk has been reported as one of the most shoplifted items from retail and pharmacy stores<sup>7</sup>.
- Efforts have been made to monitor household and childhood food insecurity and to secure the Right to Food for children in the UK through policy development<sup>8</sup>, a paucity of research on maternal and infant food insecurity in the UK remains.

This research aims to address this gap and provide qualitative evidence around the lived experience of maternal and infant food insecurity, in order to deepen understanding and help inform interventions and policy.

### Methods

Recruitment: Parents responsible for feeding a baby aged 0-6 months and self-reporting food insecurity identified through trusted networks and established organisations, (3rd sector and Government) in Scotland and England.

Data collection: Semi-structured interviews, online via Teams or by telephone, commenced December 2023. Recruitment remains open.

Analysis: We report preliminary thematic data analysis, following steps outlined by Braun and Clark<sup>9</sup>, conducted to date.

#### Sample:

- n= 9 (8 mums and 1 dad)
- n= 6 living in Aberdeen; n = 2 in Aberdeenshire; n=1 in Inverclyde
- n= 6 intended to breastfeed; n= 1 fully breastfeeding baby

"I think it's criminal that they expect people to be able to feed a new person but pay you way less than you would normally be getting, essentially, it doesn't make sense, does it, that you would get that, and it's at the whim of your employer if they're going to give you more or not"

"CFINE actually gave us some funding. They gave us £60, which then meant we could get four tubs [of formula], and that's lasted us about a month...so it's going to kind of exponentially get faster and faster that we go through it, which is going to get more and more expensive"

# Results

Insufficient income

Role of family and third sector organisations in alleviating the shortfall

Income shortfall struggles: The essential support of family and the 3rd sector to meet needs

Lack of discussion with healthcare professionals around parents financial situation

Strained conversations surrounding bottle feeding Don't ask, don't tell;

more kind of...if baby has this problem, this is maybe a solution...if they have reflux, you can use Gaviscon, or you can use probiotics, but they didn't say where you can get them from or how expensive they are, which are the kind of key pieces of information you want to know"

"it [conversations with health visitor] was

"our health visitor for baby was very supportive and, you know, gave recommendation but it was a little robotic in that, she'd say things like, I'm not allowed to advocate for set product but we'd recommend doing this, but if you want to do that you can, so it was a little bit vague"

"breastfeeding's on demand, it's free, the right temperature, you don't need to take anything with you"

"I had amazing health visitors, and the midwives... it's natural to, to breastfeed your baby but it's not actually coming so easy for every, for everyone...there was a, a few times a day when I would be just sitting in the bathroom and crying because I can't feed her,

she's screaming, I don't know what else to do"

Acknowledging breastfeeding benefits but encountering Perceived benefits challenges

**Experienced challenges** of breastfeeding

of breastfeeding



Trial and error in the face of high costs

conversations with

health professionals



Challenges finding suitable infant formula

Seeking information on formula from online, nonhealthcare professional sources

"It was Aldi's, then we tried Cow and Gate...then we moved onto SMA comfort formula for colic and constipation, which made an ever so slight difference, but he was still screaming in agony for hours, and then last week, I went onto to SMA soya formula"

"Kendamil's the only one that seems to agree with her...it's meant to be good for a lot of things 'cause we've read up on it and.. it's becoming a big thing because a lot of like YouTubers and TikTok'ers, like influencers"

### Conclusions

Healthcare professionals avoiding conversations around finances and formula feeding:

- creates a missed opportunity to ensure new parents and infants have the financial support they are entitled to...
- may mean new parents embark on an unnecessary lengthy and costly journey of trial and error to find a suitable brand of formula and information seeking from unregulated sources.

Families and third sector organisations provide a lifeline, helping new parents on a low income to acquire food, formula, nappies and essentials.

# Take home messages...

- A joined-up approach where healthcare professionals and third sector organisations work together to enable the delivery of both immediate (3rd sector provision of food, formula, nappies etc) and long-term support (healthcare professionals help new parents are receiving all benefit entitlement), may be necessary.
  - New parents favour upstream, Government level changes; easier access to formula for those on low incomes, introduction of a cap on price of formula, review of rate of statutory maternity pay.



**Research Council** 

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