



University of Manchester Breastfeeding Policy Project



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Employees of the University of Manchester, specifically mothers, were invited to take part in an interview to understand the current needs and experiences of breastfeeding mothers when returning to work to inform a draft university level policy and its implementation. By developing a breastfeeding policy that helps address the needs of breastfeeding mothers, we can help support mothers to manage the demands of breastfeeding alongside their day-to-day role's activities and responsibilities. An effective policy may facilitate breastfeeding mothers to feel that they can return to work earlier during maternity leave (should they wish to), feel more comfortable whilst at work and ultimately enable mothers to continue to enact an important part of motherhood whilst at their work. This work funded by the Wellcome EDI Innovative Bid Scheme (Inclusive Research Transformation Programme EDI Innovative Bid Scheme).

Aims:

- We aim to understand from mothers what the issues are when attempting to breastfeed once they have returned or are planning to return to work.

Objectives

- Provide recommendations towards a breastfeeding policy that would form the basis of a consultation on the matter by HR.

Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews that were up to an hour long and took place online via Zoom or face-to-face at a time convenient to the participants.

Employees had to meet the eligibility criteria to take part in the interview:

- A breastfeeding mother returning to work in the last 18 months.
- Currently employed by the University of Manchester.

In order to recruit participants, the project flyer was sent to head of departments to be circulated within their respective teams. The flyer was shared university wide by the Social Responsibility, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility team, women@manchester teams and yammer. Participants taking part in the interviews were also asked to send our flyer to any colleagues that would be interested in taking part. Once participants confirmed that they met the eligibility criteria they were sent a copy of the information sheet which detailed the process of the interview and further information about the project. If they were happy to continue and take part in the interview, a time and date convenient to the

participants was scheduled to conduct the interview. After the interview participants received a £25 voucher as a thank you for taking part.

Results

A total of 18 employees took part in the interviews. Table 1 presents the demographics of the breastfeeding mothers, who are employees of the University of Manchester and took part in this project. The table shows the demographics from n=15 breastfeeding mothers, demographics data for n=3 employees was missing.

n=11 participants were employees based in research and academia and n=7 were professional services staff. The interviews were conducted and analysed between April to October 2023. The interviews resulted in four main themes and a set of recommendations towards a breastfeeding policy to be implemented University wide.

The four main themes are the following and are detailed in the sections below:

1. Considerations made towards breastfeeding practices
2. Maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and campus childcare
3. Support from line managers, colleagues, and peers
4. Private spaces for breastfeeding and milk storage

Table 1: Demographics of breastfeeding mothers and their breastfeeding decisions when they returned to work (n=15)

Ethnicity	Job Title/Department	Number of Children	Number of months breastfeeding	Breastfeeding when returned to work	Stopped breastfeeding when returned to work
White	Directorate of the Student Experience	1	14 months	Y	n/a
White	Senior Electronics Technician	1	19 months	Y	n/a
White British	Research Fellow- Centre of Primary Care	2	7 years in total	Y	n/a
White British	Operations Assistant- AMBS	1	27 months	Y	n/a
White British	GP ST3	2	3-4 months 6-9 months	N	Y- partially
White British	Manager- People and OD Policy	2	19 months	Y	n/a
White Non British	Senior Lecturer- Department of Physics and Astronomy	2	17 months 20 months	Y	n/a
White British	Lecturer- Division of Psychology and Mental Health	2	26 months 23 months	Y	n/a
White British	PhD Researcher- History Department	1	16 months	Y	n/a
White Non-British	Senior Lecturer- Physics	2	24 months	Y	n/a
White British	Student Support and Wellbeing	2	10.5 months 9 months	N	Y- partially
Asian (Other)	Research Fellow- Engineering	1	30 months	Y	n/a
White/other	Professor Particle Physics	1	15 months	Y	n/a
White British	Senior Business Change Programme	1	14 months	Y	Y- stopped shortly after coming back to work

Prior to returning from maternity leave majority of breastfeeding employees had stress and anxiety about how they would manage to continue to breastfeed once they had started working. The levels of anxiety were much higher in mothers who just had their first child. The main reason for stress and anxiety was *how* they would continue to breastfeed after starting work. Many employees were unaware of how the university could support them, resulting in many employees making some considerations before coming back to work.

1. Considerations made towards breastfeeding practices

Employees had made many considerations before returning back to work. Some of the main considerations made were weaning their baby off breastmilk and weaning their baby from feeding during the day. Employees implied that a lot of the times they didn't want to wean the baby from breastmilk but tried to do so due to coming back to work and didn't know how to continue breastfeeding once they returned back to work from maternity leave. During this process some employees also feared developing mastitis if they stopped breastfeeding. Some other considerations made were: pumping and practising bottle feeding, sending baby to nurse a few months before starting work.

"That I had anxiety about it. Because I was just like, I just want to stop day feeding him before he starts.....(I thought) If he doesn't naturally drop..... I will just stop day feeding because it will be much easier and simpler, especially the days I am going into the office"

"I was worried what if I developed mastitis. I hadn't had it before and I feared if I got sick"

"I learnt the hard way with my first, I sent them to nurse as I started work and it was difficult as baby was ill and I was ill. I had to take a lot of time off work, so this time round I sent my second to nurse a month before so we could practise and wouldn't have to go through that again"

2. Maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and campus childcare

Employees discussed university policies and facilities that assisted them with breastfeeding, which included maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and campus childcare. One of the main considerations made before returning back to work were reduced hours at work, job sharing and flexible working arrangements. Employees appreciated the close proximity of childcare services, which also allowed them to breastfeed their child during lunch breaks.

"Its nice to have the nurse close by, I don't need to pump and go and breastfeed my baby during my lunch break. Also I get to see her too which is a bonus. I am so glad I got a space"

The experiences towards flexible working arrangements differed between academic/research staff and staff working in professional services. Academic/research staff spoke about how the ability to be flexible with regards to work assisted with breastfeeding and a formal flexible work arrangement was not always required whereas for staff working in professional services required to submit a formal request for flexible working arrangements.

"My line manager is great and the flexibility of course... my line manager enabled me to sort of put my schedule around my children and that is very helpful. I am able to breastfeed, flexible working has helped me be less stressed and I get to work on my schedule... as long as I get the work done that's what's important"

"I had to have a formal conversation with my line manager regarding flexible working, I just couldn't do the normal working hours anymore due to childcare responsibilities. it wasn't the easiest process and took a very long time to put in place"

3. Support from line managers, colleagues, and peers

Employees had varied experiences of coming back to work from maternity leave and the experience was very much depended on the support received by their line manager, colleagues and peers. Most employees reported that no formal process was followed by their line manager. The return-to-work meetings were focused more towards catching up on work related responsibilities.

“It can be really difficult to talk about breastfeeding especially with a male line manager, so we didn’t discuss it and I didn’t bring it up even though I was struggling. I can’t remember who but someone working in our department mentioned the wellbeing room and said I could use it to pump. It would have been easier if my line manager brought it up so I could have asked them other questions too, I didn’t want them to feel like I was asking for too much and that I was too much work.”

“No such process was followed. It was like how you are doing, how’s the baby, quick work update and so. My line manager is amazing and supportive, I am comfortable with her...I told her I was breastfeeding and asked her about a room to pump, she was unaware but found this information out for me.”

Majority of the employees were not provided with any information to help support them with breastfeeding or expressing milk and line managers lacked information regarding this. Some line managers were proactive in providing support. They initiated conversations regarding breastfeeding, which lessened the apprehension towards requesting certain additional or special requirements. Some employees also highlighted the support provided by colleagues and peers with regards to breastfeeding and noted the importance of peer support during this time.

“No, no, no! Well, the might have been support, but we weren't signed posted to it again. My line manager who happened to be a mum could have sign posted me to it, if they knew. But I think there's a gap to fill there with. Like a few months before returning to work HR should send information regarding support.”

“Joining a peer support group before coming back would be great.....the group would have knowledge of other rooms, back to work feeding practices and other concerns...attending groups in person, on zoom, having access on WhatsApp or an email list. People can go and ask for what they need.”

4. Private spaces for breastfeeding and milk storage

Many employees who were interviewed were unaware a private space where they were able to express and store milk. Those who were aware of the wellbeing room in the Jean Macfarlane Building and a wellbeing room in the Engineering building mentioned that the space provided was good and fit for purpose however could be made more comfortable by hanging up some pictures and posters and having a comfortable chair to sit and express milk.

“(The Engineering Building has)...a big room that can be sectioned off if required, but then anybody can come in and use it and obviously you're not going to lock it, that's not a comfortable situation. Personally, for me. I'm okay breastfeeding in public.... but pumping in public is much worse because breastfeeding looks very natural pumping does not it uses both hands... you can get a nice pumping bra but at the same time it is very obvious what's going on. There is noise and its is not a pleasant experience like breastfeeding is. So I would rather, pop into a private local area.....”

Further to this access to the rooms in Jean Macfarlane was sometimes difficult due to it being in used as a prayer and wellbeing room. It was also mentioned that the Jean Macfarlane building was not always accessible to all staff due to the distance from their office. Some employees also experienced expressing milk in toilets as they were unable to find a private space to do so on campus.

“Was in office for a keeping in touch day and needed to pump and didn't know where. A male colleague offered his office but didn't feel the most comfortable in doing that....there was nothing there so the toilet was the best place.....If I had spoke about it (to my line manager) I wouldn't have been pumping in the toilet”

Employees spoke about the importance of having a private space in which to breastfeed and express milk. For instance, the need for internal locking doors, rooms without windows or windows with curtains in order for them to feel safe while breastfeeding and expressing. All employees reported difficulties in in accessing safe places to store their breast milk. Concerns about storing expressed milk in a shared fridge, which was also used for other people's lunches, was also off-putting for some employees. Knowledge of rooms where employees can express, and store milk is important and it was highlighted that there is a need for rooms

around campus that are accessible. The need for privacy was particularly important when it came to expressing breast milk, as the following account demonstrates:

“There needs to be multiple designated rooms in the university, or if it was down to each specific department a private room with a lock and with no windows or curtains if they have windows, I think, if there is no lock as long as you could have a sign on the door or something, so that people didn't just walk in and a fridge to keep the milk, because otherwise you could pump it in and throw it away. It's a shame to do that.”

“I would feel uncomfortable putting milk in the fridge where everyone has their dinner and stuff like that... If there was only one building at the university. Will I have time to go and walk to that building pump, store my breast milk there, in a designated breast milk, fridge, or whatever.... then leave. Come back to my office, and then, before I leave, go and pick my milk.. that would be a bad solution. I haven't got time to do all that sort of stuff, you already rushing back to the nurse. Having a private place in the same building and a separate fridge would be best”

Conclusion

This project has demonstrated that barriers exist that prevent employees from breastfeeding and experiencing a supportive return to work even in an institution such as University of Manchester that has a strong focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Support is difficult to navigate and depended on the good will of the line manager and other colleagues. There is a need for a policy focused on the needs of breastfeeding mothers employed by the University of Manchester and how to best support them.

Breastfeeding Policy Recommendations

Supporting breastfeeding has many important benefits to an organisation such as the University of Manchester. These benefits may include a reduction in absenteeism, increased staff morale and a higher rate of return to work, lower recruitment and training costs and this also offers extra incentives to offer potential employees¹. Breastfeeding has important health benefits to mother and baby². Based on our research we would like to make the following recommendations towards the breastfeeding policy.

Breaks for breastfeeding or expressing milk

Breastfeeding employees should be allowed to breastfeed or express milk during work hours using their normal breaks and as part of additional breaks if required as agreed with their line manager.

A private place to express milk

A private room (with no windows or windows with curtains) shall be made available for employees to breastfeed or express milk. The room will be private, lockable and clean. The room should be in the same building as their office or within close proximity of their office. If employees prefer, they may also breastfeed or express milk in their own private offices, or in other comfortable locations agreed upon in consultation with the employee's line manager. A list of all rooms should be provided as a part of the breastfeeding policy.

Breastfeeding equipment and storage

A separate fridge to keep breastmilk should be provided. This can be a shared breastfeeding fridge kept in the private room used to express milk or a private fridge kept in the employees office to keep breastmilk.

It was also recommended that the University should consider providing a hospital grade breast pump in some private rooms.

Peer support

The University of Manchester should set up a forum or peer support group for employees who are breastfeeding or a peer support group for parents with young children. Employees should be signposted to this group by People and OD Operations and their line manager once the return from/about to return from maternity leave.

Signposting support from People and OD Operations

Employees should receive an email from People and OD Operations prior to starting and returning from maternity leave detailing information regarding breastfeeding, rooms to express milk, planning breaks for breastfeeding, breastfeeding or parent peer support groups and any other type of support available at the University, flexible working arrangements and

¹ [BF guide 2.pdf \(cdc.gov\)](#)

² [Benefits of breastfeeding - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](#)

a checklist of expected discussions with their line manager regarding any arrangements after maternity leave.

This information should also be made easily and readily available on the University of Manchester staff net website.

Support from line managers and staff

Line managers and work colleagues should assist in providing a supportive and understanding approach to facilitating breastfeeding employees. Line managers should have a formal meeting with employees returning from maternity leave. If the employees wishes to do so, breastfeeding practices should be discussed and line managers should be responsible for sign posting employees to support available in the university, provide information regarding rooms to express milk and put in requests for flexible working arrangements if required.

Line managers should a receive a pack of information detailing on how to support employees returning from maternity leave, with information on how to support breastfeeding employees or a short mandatory training on how to support employees returning from maternity leave should be conducted by the University of Manchester for line managers.