

Covid-19 and food supply

Submission by Feed UK and the British Pregnancy Advisory Service to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee

About us

Feed UK is an organisation that provides compassionate, unbiased, science-based infant feeding information for all families. Our mission is to work hard to provide practical advice and support to all families, and to challenge policies, programmes or inaccuracies that result in inequalities in infant feeding.

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) is a British reproductive healthcare charity that offers pregnancy counselling, abortion care, miscarriage management, contraception and STI testing to 100,000 women each year via our clinics in England, Wales, and Scotland. We advocate for women's reproductive choice, the provision of accurate and balanced information, and the right to make their own choices about their bodies and treatments including during pregnancy, birth, and beyond.

Have the measures announced by the Government to mitigate the disruptions to the food supply chain caused by the pandemic been proportionate, effective and timely?

For women and families that choose to formula feed, access to a consistent, reliable source of baby formula is essential. Unlike with other foods, babies are entirely reliant on formula – so while short-term shortages of other food supplies may be distressing and inconvenient to buyers, shortages of formula pose an immediate risk. If formula is not available, families are often left with no alternative but to resort to measures which risk the health and wellbeing of infants and babies, including incorrectly prepared (including watered-down) milk, or using an inappropriate milk for their baby¹.

Formula-feeding families were affected at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak during the panic-buying stage. Supermarkets were slow to issue and enforce restrictions on the purchasing of infant formula milks – leading to individual stockpiling and essential stock shortages. Messages from widely trusted sources such as Unicef's Baby Friendly Initiative may have contributed to panic-buying by stating that²:

'...we are unsure if supplies are consistently available across the UK and whether the current situation will change as the Covid-19 outbreak progresses.'

There did not appear to be any assurances with regards to infant formula milk supply given to the general public by the government, which left voluntary organisations to step in and share

¹ "APPGIFI-Inquiry-Report-Cost-of-Infant-Formula.Pdf," accessed December 15, 2019, <http://www.infantfeedingappg.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/APPGIFI-Inquiry-Report-cost-of-infant-formula.pdf>.

² "Unicef-UK-Baby-Friendly-Initiative-Statement-on-Infant-Feeding-during-the-Covid-19-Outbreak.Pdf," accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/Unicef-UK-Baby-Friendly-Initiative-statement-on-infant-feeding-during-the-Covid-19-outbreak.pdf>.

a letter written by the British Specialist Nutrition Association (BSNA) to attempt to calm the situation³.

This scenario left many families at risk of not being able to purchase infant formula milk for their formula-fed infants.

Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?

The choice of how to feed a baby is one to be made by the mother and family. Many women opt not to breastfeed or face medical issues which means breastfeeding is either impossible or insufficient to provide the amount of milk their baby needs. Once that decision has been made, public health messaging about the importance of breastfeeding does not help mothers to feed their babies. It is therefore essential that the Government recognise that nutrition of babies whose mothers opt not to or are unable to breastfeed is also essential to any assessment of food supply.

Since the Covid-19 outbreak, there has been increased economic uncertainty, with increasing numbers of people either losing their jobs, seeing sizeable reductions in income, or being furloughed on reduced pay. For many of these people, foodbanks are the only way that they are able to access the food that their family needs.

Currently many families are unable to access infant formula milk for their formula-fed babies when using foodbanks. Many foodbanks feel unable to accept donations of, or provide infant formula milk to formula-fed babies as a result of confusing advice regarding what they are able to provide without 'promoting' formula feeding and regarding the safety of infant formula milks⁴⁵. For formula-fed babies infant formula milk makes up either all or a major part of their diet for the first year of their life. Lack of access to sufficient or appropriate infant formula milks carries many risks including malnutrition, illness as a result of inappropriate milk feeds, other members of the family going without food in order to provide infant formula milk which may have a great impact on their own health⁶⁷.

To rectify this situation the government must:

- Increase the value of Healthy Start vouchers. Healthy Start vouchers are designed to help low-income pregnant women and families with children under four to buy healthy food

³ "Unicef-UK-Baby-Friendly-Initiative-Statement-on-Infant-Feeding-during-the-Covid-19-Outbreak.Pdf," accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/Unicef-UK-Baby-Friendly-Initiative-statement-on-infant-feeding-during-the-Covid-19-outbreak.pdf>.

⁴ "Provision-of-Formula-Milk-at-Food-Banks-Unicef-UK-Baby-Friendly-Initiative.Pdf," accessed December 15, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/Provision-of-formula-milk-at-food-banks-Unicef-UK-Baby-Friendly-Initiative.pdf>.

⁵ "Food_Banks_toolkit_Dec2017.Pdf," accessed December 15, 2019, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c6bb04a65a70771b7cbc916/t/5ceef9067245f10001b417fa/1559165195712/Food_Banks_toolkit_Dec2017.pdf.

⁶ "APPGIFI-Inquiry-Report-Cost-of-Infant-Formula.Pdf."

⁷ "Access to Formula Milk Briefing FINAL.Pdf," accessed December 15, 2019, <https://www.nat.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Access%20to%20Formula%20Milk%20Briefing%20FINAL.pdf>.

including formula milk. A 2012 Department of Health report found that 2.6m vouchers are issued every month, with 91% of them being spent. An All-Party Parliamentary Group on Infant Feeding report from 2018⁸ found that the cost of formula varies from £6.44 to £13.52 a week. **Healthy Start vouchers are worth only £3.10 per week (£6.20 for under-1s) – this value has not changed since 2009.**

- Issue urgent guidance to make clear that foodbanks are allowed to provide infant formula milks and baby food and that provision of these supplies should not be disincentivised or opposed by local bodies;
- End the five-week wait for Universal Credit payments and the two-child benefit cap which can leave families struggling to feed their baby; and
- Consider how those with no recourse to public funds may access infant formula milk for their babies, a disproportionate amount of whom may be advised to given their babies infant formula milk rather than breastfeed as a result of British HIV Association guidelines.

What further impacts could the current pandemic have on the food supply chain, or individual elements of it, in the short to medium-term and what steps do industry, consumers and the Government need to take to mitigate them?

Formula milk supplies appear to have recovered from the panic-buying phase in the early weeks of the pandemic. However, there are currently no measures in place to ensure that this does not happen again during the ongoing challenges posed by Covid-19.

- Industry needs to ensure that supply-side shocks are limited through adequate stocks within the UK in the event that international travel is further restricted
- Retailers need to react more quickly to panic-buying and clear incidences of stockpiling of essential goods such as infant formula. This should include limiting purchases of formula from shops and online retailers.
- Retailers should be strongly encouraged to provide infant formula, on request, as part of their schemes to deliver boxes of essential food to people who are shielding.
- eBay and other marketplaces should be encouraged to stop allowing individuals to sell essential supplies such as infant formula. This will reduce the forums available for touting and reduce incidences of stockpiling during ‘the good times’ with a view to profiting from desperation if there are further issues with availability.
- Government should ensure that infant formula is included in their definition of the ‘food supply’ for the purposes of ss25-29 of the Coronavirus Act 2020.

How effectively has the Government worked with businesses and NGOs to share information on disruptions to the supply chain and other problems, and to develop and implement solutions? How effectively have these actions been communicated to the public?

It is clear that the government and the NGOs and Organisations with which it works have taken steps to ensure that families are not vulnerable to inappropriate marketing of infant formula milks, baby

⁸ “APPGIFI-Inquiry-Report-Cost-of-Infant-Formula.Pdf,” accessed December 15, 2019, <http://www.infantfeedingappg.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/APPGIFI-Inquiry-Report-cost-of-infant-formula.pdf>.

food products, and protecting breastfeeding. However, this must not be at the expense of the families who require infant formula milks or baby food.

For formula-fed babies infant formula milk makes up all, or part of their diet for the first year of their lives. All families deserve choice over how they feed their babies and this must apply regardless of whether they are above or below the poverty line. Families living on or below the poverty line are particularly vulnerable to food poverty and to disruptions in the supply chain.

During the panic-buying phase of the initial Covid-19 outbreak, there was little to no communication from Government with NGOs and Organisations, that we saw, on the availability of infant formula milk. This allowed panic to spread and left organisations to rely on direct communication with the BSNA to provide adequate reassurance and support to parents who were understandably worried about how to feed their babies.

The Government made clear at the time that they were working with retailers, but it is our belief that a lack of central clarity from government about essential supplies including formula milk allowed panic to spread and worsened the situation. In future, Government should ensure that accurate information is provided and communicated to the public and key organisations – reducing the risk of prolonged panic-buying.

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