Joint Statement on the cancellation of 2015 Infant Feeding Survey

The Breastfeeding Network (BfN), Association of Breastfeeding Mothers (ABM) and La Leche League (LLLGB) understand that the Infant Feeding Survey (IFS) for 2015 is to be cancelled and are disappointed and surprised at this proposal.

Breastfeeding organisations support thousands of families across the UK every year and we believe it to be a great loss and a massive step backwards if the IFS does not take place next year as planned and no suitable alternative is provided in its place. More worryingly, the cancellation of the IFS further signals the slippage of breastfeeding down the public health agenda. We know breastfeeding provides the optimal start in life for our children and evidence shows there are significant savings to be made by the National Health Service when breastfeeding rates are increased.[i]

We provide evidence based breastfeeding information and support for mums, their families and those involved in a mum's care. The IFS is a unique and crucial data source that informs what we and many other early years' organisations do. The internationally recognised, robust information collected by the IFS helps us target support in appropriate areas, using suitable resources and interventions as well as giving a view of impact of interventions and education over time, particularly for families least likely to breastfeed or introduce solid food when not developmentally ready.

The IFS has been conducted every five years since 1975 and the cancellation of this survey has huge implications on the nation's health and on the practice of evidence-based support in the area of infant feeding. Affecting change in infant feeding takes time – it can take generations to have a substantial effect - so robust longitudinal data collection is even more vital in this area.

At this crucial time when the data collection in England for 2013/14 could not be published because it failed to reach the required data coverage, and when the data we do have appears to show stagnating rates, we need the intelligence from the IFS to understand the reasons behind this.

We are particularly concerned to discover whether the variations in prevalence rates are stable or the gains made in 2010 to narrow inequalities around infant feeding are reversing. This data is a vital part of the Public Health Outcomes Framework and the first step at improving child health.

The decision to cancel the IFS contradicts the outcome of the consultation published in January 2014 by the Health and Social Care Information Centre. The report stated 97% of respondents said 'cancelling the IFS would have a major detrimental impact on their work.'[ii]

The Breastfeeding Network (BfN), Association of Breastfeeding Mothers (ABM) and La Leche League (LLL) strongly urge the Government to reverse the decision to cancel the Infant Feeding Survey for 2015. Indeed there is evidence of nearly a third of survey respondents saying that frequency should be increased. While a short term saving made from halting the survey may look appealing the longer term costs of this decision represent a huge loss to our knowledge and understanding in infant feeding.

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[i] UNICEF 'Preventing Disease and Saving Resources' 2012). The importance of the return on investment and future cost savings from early intervention are also clearly stated by the Chief Medical Officer in her report 'Our Children Deserve Better – Prevention Pays' (October 2013).

[ii] Health and Social Care Information Centre IFS Consultation, January 2014 found the most important element of the IFS was 'Maintaining frequency of surveys'.

It also found the IFS is a unique dataset and without it the following would not be possible:

- Assessing the impact of service developments, campaigns and changes in policy on the duration of breastfeeding across the population.
- Targeting areas where interventions are required and tracking whether existing interventions are having an impact.
- Understanding the methods of feeding the nation adopts and the health implications, in order to educate families and the rest of the nation.
- Effective education and staff training