

Case Study

Virtually supporting new mothers and their feeding choice through the COVID-19 pandemic

Angela Lewis, Flying Start Strategic Lead,
Aneurin Bevan University Health Board

BACKGROUND

Angela Lewis is the Flying Start Strategic Lead at the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB) who works alongside Lorraine Childs, Flying Start Professional Lead.

Together with Lorraine, Angela manages the Families First services, the parent-infant mental health service, and the toileting team.

Angela manages multi-agency projects which are all focused on early years services which are predominantly health visits but also includes antenatal services and care for children aged 0-4 years.

As part of her role Angela works with the five local authority areas on behalf of ABUHB and works in partnership with early year leads within each local authority to deliver service to families and children.

AIMS

Flying Start Health Visiting provides a service to children 0-4 in disadvantaged areas as identified by Welsh Government. Before the pandemic, Angela's team had been piloting a service in Caerphilly Borough Families First facility, titled 'Responsive Feeding', that focused on contacting (and in some cases, visiting) new mothers within 72 hours of giving birth, to support them with their feeding choice. This service was originally put in place as research shows that the first 72 hours after giving birth is a very critical time for most families. This project was very successful.

Given the success of the Responsive Feeding programme during its pilot, Angela's team planned to slowly roll the service out to the five authority areas covered by ABUHB, however, these plans were pushed forward due to the pandemic. To ensure the programme was ready for a large-scale launch, Angela and her team reconfigured the service to be solely virtual and deployed available staff in each area to ensure it was able to be delivered in all areas. The parent-infant mental health service team provided the team with responsive training to allow them to virtually support mothers with mental health and emotional issues before passing concerns on to the midwife or Health Visitor.

As the team were not initially able to get the "Attend Anywhere" video platform integrated into their service, in the interim, the nurses assisted patients with texting their evaluations and using WhatsApp video calling to deliver support as needed.

CHALLENGES

Staffing was a major challenge when the pandemic hit; many staff had to quickly change their roles and a number of staff were being deployed across the Health Board to perform duties that differed from their normal role.

When it came to the Responsive Feeding programme, some areas did not have the right staff to flexibly respond to the pandemic and struggled with manpower to get the programme up and running. Access to information was also an issue, however, this was quickly combated through collaboration with the local authorities.

Some staff were resistant at the beginning because they felt like they were not trained to deliver a quality service virtually and that there would not be enough capacity to support the number of women needing assistance.

OUTCOMES

When the pandemic hit and all programmes were moved online, innovativeness enabled virtual, flexible working and the expansion of support areas.

In the case of Responsive Feeding, a member of staff based in Caerphilly was now able to contact a mother in Newport for example, expanding support areas considerably.

Virtual working has allowed for collaboration across boundaries, local authority areas, and enabled combined skillsets.

Breastfeeding is one of the most cost-effective, disease preventing practices around, so being able to support an increase in breastfeeding throughout the pandemic was incredibly important and beneficial.

NEXT STEPS

Following on from their success during the pandemic, Angela aims to continue to use virtual means to support families and children.

Given their expansive geographical area and client base typically being digitally inclusive, Angela hopes the team can continue to learn from their work during the pandemic to improve their service through greater digital delivery.

Having an outside party assess the success of the virtual programmes would be highly beneficial moving forward and having this evidence to share at a local level with Health Boards and associated partners could help facilitate more change and innovative practices.

Angela would like to see more research in the area of Responsive Feeding and more feeding support for new mothers, noting that she herself is pursuing a Ph.D. on the topic to highlight the incredibly important area of study that has a significant impact on many other areas of early childhood development.

“Being there to listen to people when they need it is important and makes a difference.”

Angela Lewis

