

# CALL TO ACTION **STEP 4**: PROTECT BABIES FROM HARMFUL COMMERCIAL INTERESTS



## UNICEF UK'S CALL TO ACTION

In 2016 Unicef UK launched a Call to Action, urging all UK Governments to take steps to improve breastfeeding rates by:

1. Developing a **National Infant Feeding Strategy Board**, tasked with creating a strategy and plan to deliver the goal of ensuring more babies are breastfed
2. Including actions to **promote, protect and support breastfeeding in all policy areas** where breastfeeding has an impact
3. Implementing **evidence-based initiatives that support breastfeeding**,

including the Unicef UK Baby Friendly Initiative

4. Protecting the public from harmful commercial interests by **adopting, in full, the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes** and subsequent resolutions ("the Code").

This paper explains **Step 4**: why work to improve breastfeeding rates must include strengthening the law that protects babies from harmful commercial interests.

**ADD YOUR VOICE TO THE  
CAMPAIGN**

The way babies are fed has a profound effect on their present and future health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and UK governments recommend exclusive breastfeeding up to six months of age, with continued breastfeeding along with other foods thereafter. This provides physical and mental health benefits lasting well into adulthood.

Babies who are fed with infant formula should be given 'first' infant formula (whey-based) for the first year of life, after which cow's milk can replace formula milk. Other foods should be

introduced alongside first formula at around six months.

The UK baby feeding industry is one of the most profitable in the world, producing hundreds of milks, feeding products and processed foods specifically aimed at babies. There is little need for most of these products.

Bottle-feeding and breastfeeding parents alike need clear, factual information about infant feeding. Instead, companies spend millions on sophisticated and often confusing marketing

encouraging them not to breastfeed or to stop breastfeeding early, and to use an array of different, expensive formula milks, as soon as possible and for as long as possible. In addition, parents are then urged to use costly, processed baby food, often before six months of age. There is no evidence that more expensive formula milks or baby foods are beneficial to a baby's health. Most of these are unnecessary, and can be harmful.

This marketing is highly successful, with the UK baby feeding industry projected to be worth over \$900 million a year by 2019. As a consequence, the UK now has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. This has a severe impact on our children's health and wellbeing, with soaring rates of childhood obesity and diet-related illnesses such as diabetes. Despite compelling evidence that breastfeeding saves lives, protects health and cuts costs, marketing of breastmilk substitutes fuels a misconception that formula milk is almost as good as breastmilk.

Because of its profound effect on human health, WHO has long considered baby feeding to be in need of special protection from commercial interests. Over 30 years ago, WHO produced the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes (the Code) which aims to restrict the advertising of food and drink intended for babies. This ensures that all parents, whether breast- or bottle-feeding, are protected from harmful marketing and given only scientific, factual and evidence-based information about infant feeding.

WHO and the United Nations continue to urge all countries to adopt the Code as law. The UK has never done this, instead choosing to adopt inadequate legislation which places few restrictions on the advertising of food and drink intended for babies.

## THE CODE

Protects all babies, whether breast- or bottle-fed, by requiring:

- No advertising of breastmilk substitutes
- Proper use of breastmilk substitutes through correct information and labelling
- No gifts or free samples to health care workers
- No direct contact between companies and mothers
- Health workers to receive only scientific and factual information.\*

**WHO and the United Nations urge all countries to adopt the Code as law, but the UK has never done this. The UK legislation is inadequate and places few restrictions on the advertising of food and drink intended for babies.**

\*Scientific and factual information about infant feeding, free from commercial interests, can be found from [First Steps Nutrition Trust](#), [Unicef UK's Baby Friendly Initiative](#) and the [Department of Health](#).

In light of the UK's continuing low breastfeeding rates and the serious impact this has on public health, Unicef UK calls on the UK and all devolved Governments to protect the public from harmful and misleading marketing by adopting, in full, the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and all subsequent resolutions as recommended by WHO.

It is crucial that UK governments fully adopt the Code in order to protect the health of all babies, whether breast- or formula- fed.

*Much greater political will is needed to enact and enforce The Code, together with national investment to ensure implementation and accountability.*

*Lancet Breastfeeding series, 2016*

## IT'S TIME TO CHANGE THE CONVERSATION ADD YOUR VOICE TO THE CAMPAIGN

To read the Call to Action, references and all four papers, visit [unicef.uk/bficaltoaction](https://unicef.uk/bficaltoaction)