

WIRRAL HEALTH & WELLBEING KNOWLEDGE HUB

HOME OF THE JOINT STRATEGIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Breastfeeding

Wirral Public Health

July 2026

Breastfeeding

For further information please contact phintelligence@wirral.gov.uk

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Key summary

- **Breastfeeding delivers major health benefits for both babies and mothers**, reducing risks of SIDS, infections, obesity, diabetes and childhood cancers in children, and lowering maternal risks of breast and ovarian cancer, osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease.
- **Exclusive breastfeeding is recommended for the first six months**, but many mothers face barriers to breastfeeding, including insufficient support, societal attitudes, pain, difficulties with latching, and concerns about milk supply.
- **Variation in breastfeeding rates is associated with inequalities**, with higher rates among older mothers, ethnic minority groups and those living in less deprived areas; mothers in the most deprived communities are significantly less likely to breastfeed.
- **Access to breastfeeding support for families can increase breastfeeding rates**; e.g. local support services such as Koala North-West are associated with higher continuation rates compared to families who do not access support.
- **Wirral's overall breastfeeding rates remain below the England average**, with 54.1% initiating breastfeeding compared with 71.9% nationally, and 41.1% still breastfeeding at 6–8 weeks compared with 55.6% nationally.
- **Increasing breastfeeding rates could generate substantial health savings**, with estimates ranging from at least **£23.5 million annually** from reduced childhood illness treatment costs to **up to £50 million per year** when wider health benefits are considered (national).
- **Breastfeeding** features in the Council Wirral Plan, Wirral Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and Wirral Best Start in Life Plan, as a means of improving child outcomes and reducing health inequalities.

Why is this important to Health and Wellbeing?

Breastfeeding has multiple health benefits for both mother and baby, from reducing the risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome), childhood diabetes, leukaemia, obesity and infections, to lowering the mother's own risk of breast and ovarian cancers, osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease¹. A systematic review by The Lancet calculated that boosting breastfeeding rates for infants under six months of age to 45% across the UK would cut treatment costs of common childhood illnesses and save healthcare systems at least £23.5 million annually in the UK².

Other economic analyses by UNICEF UK suggested even higher potential savings; for example, that moderate increases in breastfeeding rates could save the NHS up to £50million annually on childhood illnesses alone, with additional savings from reduced maternal breast cancer, obesity and SIDS not fully captured in earlier models⁵.

Recommendations state the ideal is exclusive breastfeeding until 6 months, though important to acknowledge that breastfeeding can be difficult to adopt, circumstances are different for every individual and unfortunately, many women find themselves in environments that discourage breastfeeding.

Public Health England (PHE, now the Office for Health Improvement & Disparities or OHID) reported that too often, women stop breastfeeding because the right support is not available to them³.

Evidence also shows that mental health and breastfeeding are closely linked, with UK qualitative and survey research showing a bi-directional relationship between breastfeeding difficulties and maternal mental health. Over 1,000 new mothers in the UK were asked whether they thought that breastfeeding challenges had impacted their mental health and almost 2 in 3 confirmed that they had for example⁶.

[The Best Start in Life \(previously Start for Life\)](#) is the government's strategy for improving child development and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development by 2028, it contains advice on a wide range of topics, including breastfeeding⁴.

The latest [Infant feeding survey \(IFS\) in England](#)⁹ was published in June 2026 by OHID, the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, which is part of the Department of Health and Social Care; Ipsos conducted the survey). The IFS is a national longitudinal survey of mothers living in England which looks at how they feed their infants during the first 10 months of life. The last infant feeding survey conducted and published was in 2010, so the latest survey is an important update containing important national data on breastfeeding, which is detailed throughout this briefing.

Other campaigns and initiatives relevant to breastfeeding include [UNICEF's Baby Friendly](#) (BFI) initiative, and England's [Healthy Start scheme](#) (free vitamins and food vouchers for eligible pregnant women and children).

Factors evidenced to impact breastfeeding are as follows:

- Nationally, age is a factor in likelihood of breastfeeding; mothers aged 35 years and over (92%) were more likely to initiate breastfeeding compared with mothers aged 20 to 24 years (73%)⁹
- Cultural factors affect breastfeeding rates nationally, with mothers from ethnic minority groups were more likely to initiate breastfeeding; for example, 99% of mothers from both a Black or Other ethnic group, 96% from an Asian ethnic group and 91% from Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups, compared with mothers from White ethnic groups (82%)⁹
- Deprivation is also a factor nationally, with around 8 in ten (80%) mothers living in the least deprived areas initiating breastfeeding, compared with around 6 in 10 (60%) mothers living in the most deprived areas¹³
- Data on age, deprivation and ethnicity and how these affect breastfeeding rates are available nationally (in the Infant Feeding Survey⁹ for example) but are not published at a local (Wirral) level.

What is the current local Wirral context?

A crucial strand of Wirral Council's plan for 2023-27 www.wirral.gov.uk/council-plan is to focus on supporting children and families in need as early as possible to improve outcomes and reduce the likelihood of higher costs intervention further down the line.

Breastfeeding also links to Priority Area 3 of the Wirral Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-27 to 'Ensure the best start in life for all children and young people' and closely informed by 'All Together Fairer', Cheshire and Merseyside's approach to tackling inequalities.

Wirral's Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2027 focusses on the key areas that evidence shows us will make the biggest difference to population health and inequalities. Supporting breastfeeding strongly links to the following themes of the strategy:

- **Priority 2: Strengthen health and care action to address differences in health outcomes.** Breastfeeding is particularly low in more deprived communities; targeting these areas of Wirral - combined with service accessibility - will encourage better engagement
- **Priority 3: Ensure the best start in life for all children and young people.** Within this priority, one key area identified is to improve our support and prevention services so that wherever possible, they are based in the heart of local communities and are adaptable to the changing needs of new mothers and families

Increasing breastfeeding initiation and continuation is also a strand in Wirral's recently (April 2026) launched Best Start in Life Plan ([Best Start in Life Plan 2026 to 2029: Foreword | wirral.gov.uk](#)¹⁰).

Local Demographics

A more detailed overview of local demographics relevant to breastfeeding (e.g. age structure of the population, deprivation, births etc...), can be found in the interactive [Wirral JSNA Health & Wellbeing report](#). Demographics relevant to breastfeeding in Wirral are:

- The number of births has been decreasing in Wirral in recent years, from 3,563 in 2015, to 2,612 in 2025 (the most recent year for which we have data)
- Although the number of births has decreased, the proportion of mothers living in the most deprived areas of Wirral remains broadly stable
- Just under half of all births (46%) which occurred in WUTH's (Wirral University Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust) Arrowe Park Hospital in 2025 occurred in women living in the most deprived areas of Wirral
- The most recent Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD, 2025), showed that overall, around 1 in 3 of the total population (111,000 people or 34%) lived in areas classed as deprived – meaning that a greater proportion of mothers were living in deprivation than is the case for the general population in Wirral overall
- Wirral has a lower proportion of younger adults in their 20s and 30s and a higher proportion of older people, compared to England
- Wirral has a lower proportion of residents from ethnically diverse backgrounds compared to England (data shows that those from ethnically diverse backgrounds are more likely to breastfeed than those of White British ethnicity)

Evidence base

By giving women positive support, more women could be encouraged to breastfeed and give their child the healthiest start to life possible. A recent NIHR (National Institute for Health & Care Research) paper highlighted that timely, skilled and tailored breastfeeding support can not only increase breastfeeding initiation and continuation, but it could also help reduce health inequalities⁷.

Evidence indicates that many women stop breastfeeding earlier than planned, due to barriers such as pain, the perception that they do not produce sufficient milk to meet their baby's needs, embarrassment about breastfeeding in public and negative societal attitudes to breastfeeding, and a lack of trusted, non-judgemental support, with consequent negative impacts on their wellbeing^{6,7}. While these barriers affect all women, they can be particularly challenging in settings where family and friends also lack knowledge and experience⁷.

Mixed feeding is preferred by some parents (choosing from a combination of breastfeeding, bottle feeding breastmilk and formula). However, it can be a difficult transition to make for the mother and baby, so tailored support can be crucial in reducing the risk of mastitis and helping babies and mothers adjust to a different feeding method⁴.

The latest data from the Infant Feeding Survey (2024)⁹ indicates that of the mothers who would have liked to breastfeed for longer, the most commonly reported factors that would have helped were:

- If their baby could have latched on to the breast more easily (53%)
- More support from hospital staff was reported by 3 in ten mothers (30%)
- More than a quarter (28%) said breastfeeding being less painful would have helped them continue
- Around 1 in 5 mothers (21%) said more support (e.g. from community midwifery teams) would have helped them breastfeed for longer

Local action and activity making a difference

Breastfeeding support in Wirral is available from a number of different sources and organisations.

- [Koala North West](#) provide free, community-led breastfeeding support for all families resident in Wirral, including home visits, 1-to-1 support, and local drop-in groups. Sessions are facilitated by friendly, trained peer supporters who have lived experience with breastfeeding and expressing
- [Wirral Infant Feeding Team](#) (part of Wirral Community NHS Trust) provide dedicated and tailored support to local breastfeeding mums and their babies, work alongside Koala North-West to do this. They provide information, support and training to healthcare professionals to ensure a high standard of care for pregnant people and breast/ chestfeeding families. The team also support families with complex infant feeding needs, antenatally and postnatally via the specialist Lactation Clinic. Their number is: 0151 514 0219
- [Infant Feeding Support](#) is available via Wirral Women's and Children's Hospital (based at Arrowe Park) who offer and run Infant Feeding Clinics where women can be seen with their babies by Midwives (referral via a Midwife). For more information, call the Maternity Ward on 0151 604 7131 for 24-hour telephone feeding support

Wirral's Early Childhood Service (ECS, which includes Wirral Family Hubs) and 0-19 Health and Wellbeing Service (via Wirral Community Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust) jointly hold the prestigious UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative⁵ accreditation, confirming high standards of support for infant feeding and parent-infant relationships locally. The joint accreditation is to Level 3 standard, evidencing that environments and practice across the two services promote both infant feeding and responsive parenting.

The updated Healthy Child Programme Framework⁸, is the government's strategy for improving child development and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development by 2028, aims to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0 to 19 (age 25 for care leavers or those living with special educational needs and disabilities) in England. It sets out evidence-based approaches to prevention, early intervention and family support, supporting the ambition of raising the healthiest ever generation of children.

Supporting this work, is the national parent-facing Best Start in Life (previously Start for Life) campaign website¹, which contains advice and signposting around breastfeeding. The campaign brings together services, advice and support for families from pregnancy through to early childhood and starting school and aims to make it easier for parents and carers to access trusted information, childcare options and practical support at every stage of a child's development.

The Best Start in Life website includes:

- Guidance from pregnancy through to age five and beyond
- Support with early years development, health and wellbeing
- Information on childcare options and early education
- Tools such as a childcare checker and breakfast clubs map
- Links to local and national support services

In response to this national strategy, Wirral's recently (April 2026) launched its own local Best Start in Life Plan¹⁰ ([Best Start in Life Plan 2026 to 2029: Foreword | wirral.gov.uk](https://www.wirral.gov.uk/best-start-in-life-plan-2026-to-2029-foreword)), and increasing breastfeeding initiation and continuation is a strand in this plan.

NHS Cheshire & Merseyside [Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding Strategy](#) (2025)¹¹ was developed in partnership with a wide range of partners and groups across the region and outlines the commitment to improving breastfeeding rates across Cheshire and Merseyside - particularly the duration of exclusive breastfeeding to six months which has the potential to significantly enhance the health and wellbeing of both mothers and babies. In doing so, the aim is to reduce health inequalities and the long-term demand on health and care services.

How does our local performance compare?

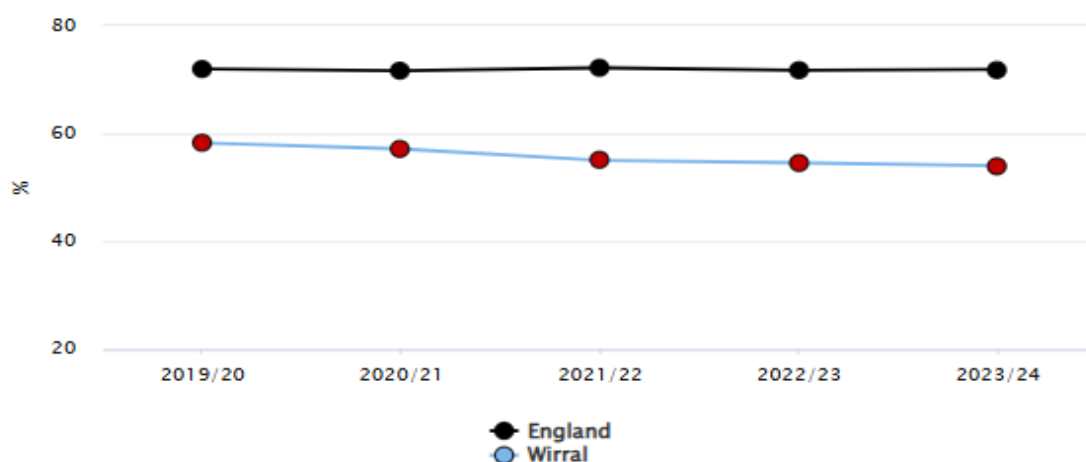
England has some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the developed world and whilst there has been a considerable and positive increase in breastfeeding both nationally and in Wirral over the past few years, Wirral continues to have lower breastfeeding rates than is the case in England overall.

There are 2 main headline measures of breastfeeding:

1. **Breastfeeding Initiation:** This is the percentage of those who start breastfeeding, and includes all babies who have been given breast milk, or whose mothers put them to the breast at all, even if this was only once, this includes expressed and donor milk
2. **Breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks:** This is the percentage of infants that are totally or partially breastfed at age 6 to 8 weeks (partially breastfed is defined as infants who are currently receiving any breast milk at 6 to 8 weeks of age and who may also receive formula milk or any other liquids or food)

Figure 1 below shows that 54.1% of mothers in Wirral chose breastfeeding for their baby's first feed (initiation), compared to 71.9% in England overall in 2023/24. This figure has remained broadly stable in England but has decreased in Wirral in recent years.

Figure 1: Trend in breastfeeding initiation in Wirral and England, 2019/20 to 2023/24

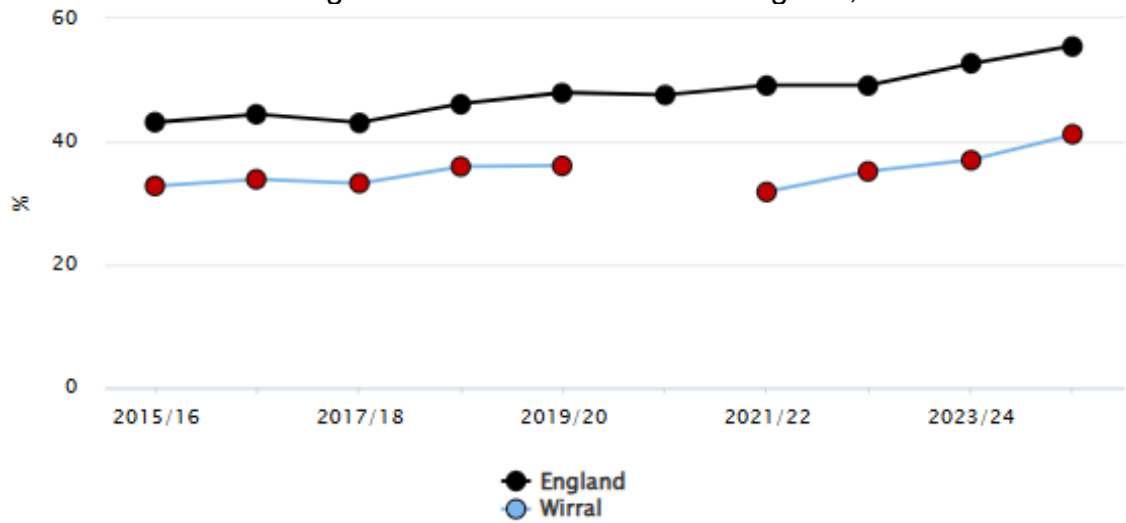


Source: Fingertips, 2026

Note: breastfeeding initiation defined as babies whose first feed is known to be breastmilk, including expressed and donor milk

Figure 2 shows that by 6-8 weeks after birth, 41.1% of mothers were still breastfeeding in Wirral, compared to 55.6% of mothers in England in 2024/25; this is a figure that has increased in recent years.

Figure 2: Trend in breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks in Wirral and England, 2015/16 to 2024/25

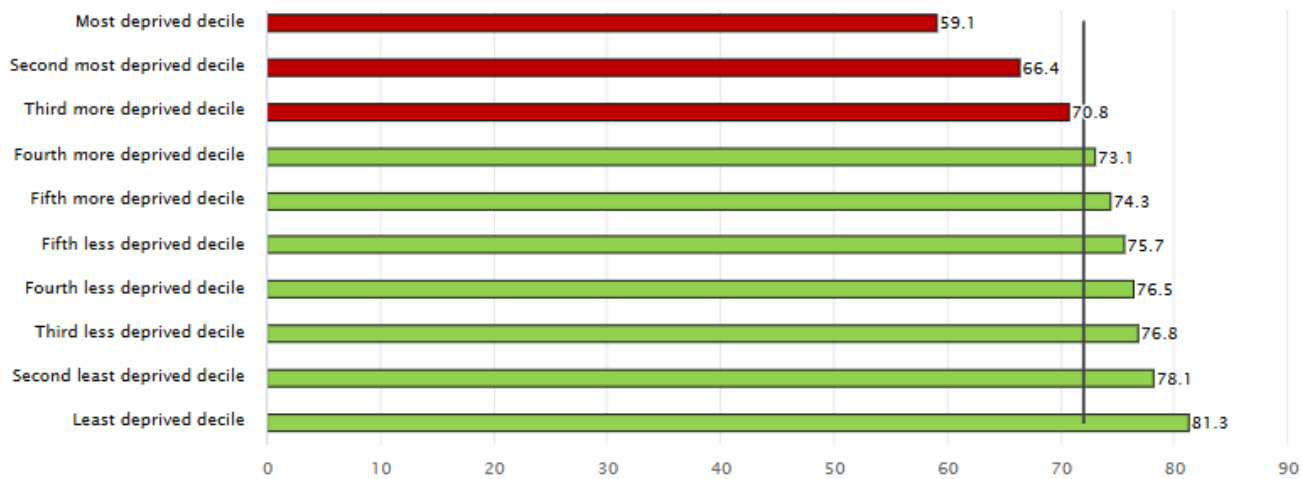


Source: Fingertips, 2026
Note: breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks defined as the percentage of infants that are totally or partially breastfed at age 6 to 8 weeks

[Local evidence](#) from the Wirral’s First 1,001 Days¹² report illustrates clear differences between wards within Wirral, both of initiation and continued breastfeeding, with rates lower in areas of deprivation. Data from this report also showed that families who accessed the support of Koala North-West, were far more likely to have continued breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks, compared to overall rates for Wirral.

For example, in 2024/25, in Wirral overall, 41.1% of mothers were still breastfeeding; in mothers who accessed Koala’s support however, that figure was 75% - a considerable difference. National data (from Fingertips, also shows very clearly the inequalities apparent in breastfeeding initiation and prevalence at 6-8 weeks, by deprivation decile, see **Figures 3 and 4** below.

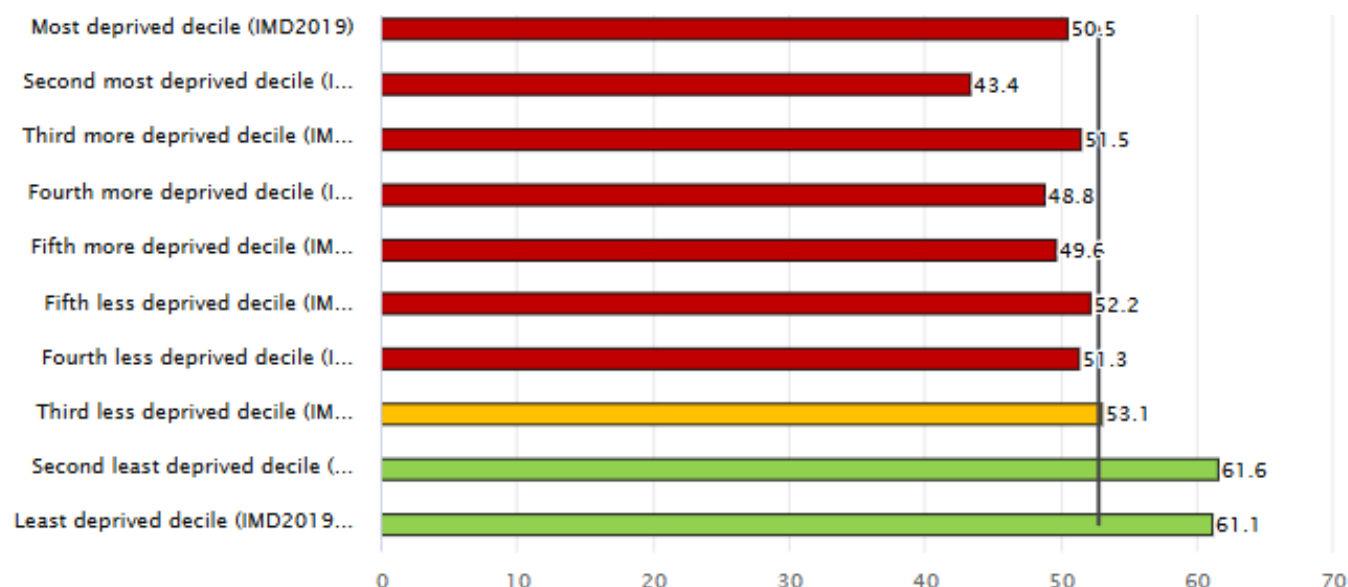
Figure 3: Inequalities in initiation of breastfeeding in England (%), 2023/24



Source: Fingertips, OHID (2026)
Note: Local (Wirral) inequalities data not published

As **Figure 3** above shows, the inequality in breastfeeding initiation is considerable; with national data showing that 81.3% of parents from the least deprived (or most affluent) decile or 10% of the population initiated breastfeeding in 2023/24, compared to just 59.1% of parents from the most deprived decile or 10%.

Figure 4: Inequalities in breastfeeding at 6-8 weeks in England (%), 2023/24



Source: Fingertips, OHID (2026)

Note: Local (Wirral) inequalities data not published; data on inequalities for 2024/25 not yet available

As **Figure 4** shows, inequalities in breastfeeding prevalence at 6-8 weeks is also considerable; with national data showing that over 60% of parents from the least deprived (or most affluent) deciles of the population had continued with breastfeeding in 2023/24, compared to between 40-50% of parents from the most deprived deciles of the population.

Further information and support

Organisation	Detail	Contact
Family Toolbox	Family Toolbox is an online Wirral specific resource for local families; it provides practical advice, links and contacts to support parents.	For more information, visit Wirral's local Best Start in Life offer on the Family Toolbox website.
Koala North-West	Koala North-West are currently commissioned (by the Public Health Department in Wirral) to provide breastfeeding support to local women and families in the community	Website https://koalanw.co.uk/ Email: admin@koalanw.co.uk Families can contact them directly by phone (no need for a referral): 0151 608 8288
National Breastfeeding Helpline	National Breastfeeding Helpline is 24 hours a day (National)	For more information, call them on 0300 100 0212
The Breastfeeding Network (BfN)	This network aims to be an independent source of support and information for breastfeeding women and others (National)	For more information, visit the website at https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/

Organisation	Detail	Contact
Wirral Infant Feeding Team	Wirral Infant Feeding Team (part of Wirral Community NHS Trust) provide dedicated, tailored support to local breastfeeding mums and their babies, working alongside Koala North-West to do this. They provide information, support and training to healthcare professionals to ensure a high standard of care for pregnant people and breastfeeding families. The team also support families with complex infant feeding needs, antenatally and postnatally via a specialist Lactation Clinic	For more information, call 0151 514 0219
Wirral Family Hubs	Wirral Family Hubs provide a range of support for families with children aged 0-19 (or up to 25 with additional needs). Every child in Wirral has an allocated Family Hub.	For more information, email the main central team at familyhubs@wirral.gov.uk to find out more about your local Hub
Wirral Family Information Service	This Service offers information and advice on local childcare, activities, and family support.	For more information, email them at fis@wirral.gov.uk
Wirral InfoBank	This is a directory of local care and support services, community resources, activities and information (not just those specific to families or children)	For more information, visit the website at https://www.wirralinfobank.co.uk/
Wirral Women's and Children's Hospital (based at Arrowe Park)	They offer Infant Feeding Support and run Infant Feeding Clinics where women can be seen with their babies by specialist Midwives (referral via a Midwife).	For more information, call the Maternity Ward on 0151 604 7131 for 24-hour telephone feeding support

Sources and additional evidence

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9. Infant feeding survey in England 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/infant-feeding-survey-in-england-2024>
10. Wirral Best Start in Life Plan (April 2026) ([Best Start in Life Plan 2026 to 2029](#))
11. NHS Cheshire & Merseyside [Breastfeeding and Infant Feeding Strategy](#) (2025)
12. Wirral's First 1001 Days (2022): [link to Summary Report April 2021 – March 2022](#) 2022
13. Fingertips Child & Maternal Health Profile, OHID (2026): <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/child-health-profiles#gid/1938133222/ati/6>

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