

Having an impact on mums

ERIN LYONS talks to the woman helping with breastfeeding at Oxford's Baby Cafes Group

No matter how prepared you may feel before giving birth, the support of other mums can prove invaluable when it comes time to start breastfeeding.

That is the insight behind Oxford Baby Cafes Group, community-run breastfeeding support service, which Lisa Mansour has been in charge of for the past four years.

The 43-year-old, who is a qualified lactation consultant, said it is hard to underestimate the importance of these type of drop-in sessions for new mums, explaining: "It lets them know they aren't alone."

"It can be quite common as a new mother to feel isolated and worry that you are doing things wrong when it comes to breastfeeding or feel like you'll be judged for bringing things up at an actual health appointment."

She says it is the best of both worlds at the baby cafe sessions, which are part of a national franchise model created in 2004, as they bring together the social aspect of mother-baby groups with trained breastfeeding specialists who can deal with a range of problems.

Ms Mansour, who lives in Blewbury, will celebrate a decade working with the Oxford Baby Cafe Group this year, having previously worked as a lactation consultant for the NHS in Oxford for seven years.

"I originally wanted to go on to do midwifery but I fell in love with the immediate impact you can have helping mums with breastfeeding," she explained.

"It's incredibly rewarding seeing that even from spending an hour with a mother you can make a massive difference."

"It's not just the physical health side either, there is a mental health aspect and really it is about dealing in a holistic way with the needs of the mother."

The Oxford branch currently holds four weekly sessions in the city run by experienced breastfeeding counsellors, many of whom originally attending as mothers themselves.

Parents are encouraged to come for help with specific issues or just hang out with other breastfeeding mothers, with partners and siblings also welcome.

There are even special monthly antenatal workshops for pregnant women who want to get a head start on what to expect.

As the baby cafe is a drop in service there can be anywhere from two or three families to 18 mothers needing help at any one session.

Ms Mansour said: "Quite often we'll get mums coming in with very common problems like needing to adjust how they breastfeed so it is more comfortable."

"When we started it was mostly that sort of thing, but now we get more complicated cases being referred to us by GPs."

She pointed to issues like babies experiencing tongue tie – a genetic



Lisa Mansour, head of Oxford Baby Cafes Group, pictured holding three-month-old baby Libi Tammam

Picture: Ed Nix

condition meaning they can't always properly latch on to the breast – or babies not gaining weight in the way they should be.

"We're trained so we can handle it," she said but added: "It's something I've increasingly noticed and I think it is likely tied into issues with funding across local services."

As if the challenges of ensuring complex cases were properly supported wasn't enough, things got even harder for Ms Mansour and her leadership team of Jayne Joyce and Charlotte Gilman in 2016 when the group's entire funding was slashed by Oxfordshire County Council.

At the moment they are entirely reliant on the donations of users and small grants to raise the £45,000 a year needed to keep running.

"I have to spend a lot of time filling out applications, even for the small grants there are reams of forms to fill in," she revealed.

"Luckily we have a really good management committee made up of volunteers who are happy to help but it does take me away from other things I would rather be doing."

She added: "It's not ideal and we know it's not a sustainable way to do things but the problem is we fall between a lot of different categories when it comes to funding."

"For instance, last year Children in Need were looking to support groups that helped with the mental health of new mothers."

"We do that, but it isn't the entirety of what we do and that happens fairly often."

She said it related back to the original funding cut and that is was

a national issue as much as a local one that stemmed from responsibility for public health being split from the NHS to local councils.

"Groups that straddle both – such as breastfeeding support – will often get told they should be funded by the other and when resources are stretched they are the things that get cut," she added.

"After funding stopped we had to look at what we were doing and what was sustainable going forward."

"For quite a while we had been under-costing what we were doing because we knew budgets were tight but I think it made us reassess and I had to ensure if I left, the position was something you could expect someone to walk into."

The group halved the number of

sessions, from eight down to four per week, and are still in need of long-term funding, but Ms Mansour said it was worth the effort to keep going.

"What is most gratifying is when you see someone come in with their second or third child, when they were with us for their first," she said.

"Usually they only need a quick refresher but it is so nice to know they wanted to come back."

Ms Mansour, who already has a 14-year-old daughter, will soon be on the other side of the service as she is currently pregnant with her second child. At least I know where the support services are."

● To find out more about Oxford Baby Cafes Group visit obcg.org.uk, where you can also donate to keep the service going.