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Relton, C. [orcid.org/0000-0001-8530-5011](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8530-5011), Umney, D., Strong, M. [orcid.org/0000-0003-1486-8233](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1486-8233) et al. (2 more authors) (2017) Challenging social norms: discourse analysis of a research project aiming to use financial incentives to change breastfeeding behaviours. In: Lancet. Public Health Science 2017, 24 Nov 2017, London, UK. Elsevier , S75-S75.

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**Title: Challenging social norms: discourse analysis of a research project aiming to change breastfeeding behaviours using financial incentives**

Authors: Clare Relton<sup>1\*</sup> Darren Umney<sup>2\*</sup> Mark Strong<sup>1</sup>, Professor Kate Thomas<sup>1</sup> Professor Mary J Renfrew<sup>3</sup>

\* joint first authors

1 School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, Regent Court, 30 Regent Street, Sheffield, S1 4DA

2 Department of Engineering and Innovation, Open University, UK Faculty of Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA.

3 Mother and Infant Research Unit, School of Nursing and Health Sciences, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

Darren is an early career researcher

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Background**

The UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. A research project conducted the first trial of a financial incentive scheme to increase breastfeeding in areas in the UK where breastfeeding was not the norm. The announcement of the initial field test generated significant media and social media coverage. Given the media interest and scrutiny in public health research and action (especially where financial incentives are concerned) there is a need to understand negative responses (and the underlying values that they represented) in order to inform future public health research into financial incentives.

### **Methods**

A researcher (DU) who was external to the project and the research areas led a discourse analysis of the research project archive, drawing upon 500+ documents including team briefs, scholarly articles, publicity material, media reports and online responses. The purpose of the analysis was to identify where conflicting values were apparent, particularly those at critical transition points in the project, which led to further in depth content and visual analysis of the relevant project documents.

### **Findings**

This analysis exposed fundamental, opposing and apparently intractable views on the use of financial incentives to increase breastfeeding in the UK. These conflicts were apparent from the early stages of the research project and recurred at critical points during the development and delivery of the scheme. In contrast to local stakeholder views, media and social media commentators tended to marginalise the research question and focus instead on discussing why offering incentives for breastfeeding should not be national policy. The analysis also revealed how the project researchers used extensive stakeholder consultation, sensitive language in all public engagements and adapted well-established visual representations of financial incentives, in order to navigate through the inherent controversy.

### **Interpretation**

Projects that challenge societal behavioural norms should anticipate strong and sometimes hostile reactions when planning and progressing their research. Also, researchers should- not assume that media and social media reactions represent the considered views of those stakeholders directly affected by the research, which in this case were mothers (and their healthcare providers) in the areas where the scheme was being trialled.

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### **Contributors**

CR and DU conceived the idea for the discourse analysis and are joint first authors. DU conducted the analysis and wrote the first draft. CR, MS, KT, & MR all contributed subsequent drafts. CR led the revision of the final version of the abstract. All authors have seen and approved the final version of the Abstract for publication.

### **Conflicts of interest**

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.