

# Facebook, mothers & midwives: the role of social media in improving breastfeeding support services



## Background

- Facebook support groups are now commonly used by new mothers to access breastfeeding support. <sup>1</sup>
- Mothers report difficulty in identifying expertise and concerns about the lack of regulation and validated moderation of online support. <sup>2</sup>
- Midwife moderators use their professional knowledge and communication skills to offer support, address misinformation and facilitate participation in online support communities, hosted by Facebook. <sup>3,4</sup>
- The use of midwife moderators for pregnancy and postnatal Facebook support has demonstrated success in providing relational continuity and validated information to mothers. <sup>3,4</sup>
- Little is understood about how Facebook groups aimed at women in specific areas are linked to face to face support, midwives or maternity services. <sup>5</sup>
- Further research is needed to develop sustainable solutions to meet mothers' expectations of digital support.



## Aims

- To explore Facebook group use by mothers, including links to face to face support and experiences of group moderation, including by midwives.
- To identify midwives' perceptions and/or experiences of engaging with mothers and providing support via Facebook groups, and barriers and facilitators to doing so.
- To determine how current services are formatted and assess their sustainability.
- To make recommendations to improve and sustain practice.

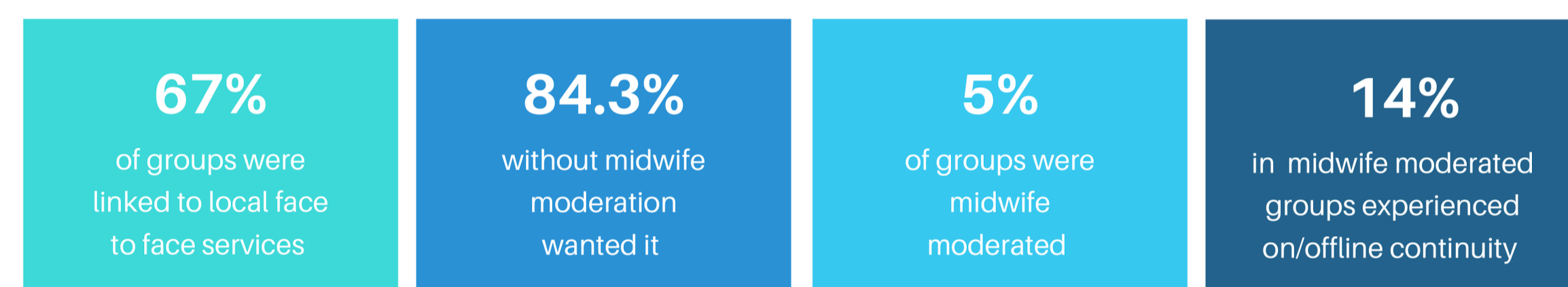
## Methods

- Two mixed methods online questionnaires were used to explore the experiences of mothers currently using local Breastfeeding Support Facebook groups, and midwives' perceptions and experiences of providing online support.
- Questions for mothers related to how the group was moderated, perceived accuracy and value of the online support received, particularly from midwives.
- Midwives were asked about their personal and/or professional Facebook use, awareness and perceptions of Facebook support including impacts and concerns.
- Semi structured interviews were conducted with midwife moderators to explore experiences and identify group formats.
- Thematic analysis and simple content analysis were conducted and sustainability modelling applied to the results.



## Results

### 2028 mothers completed an online survey



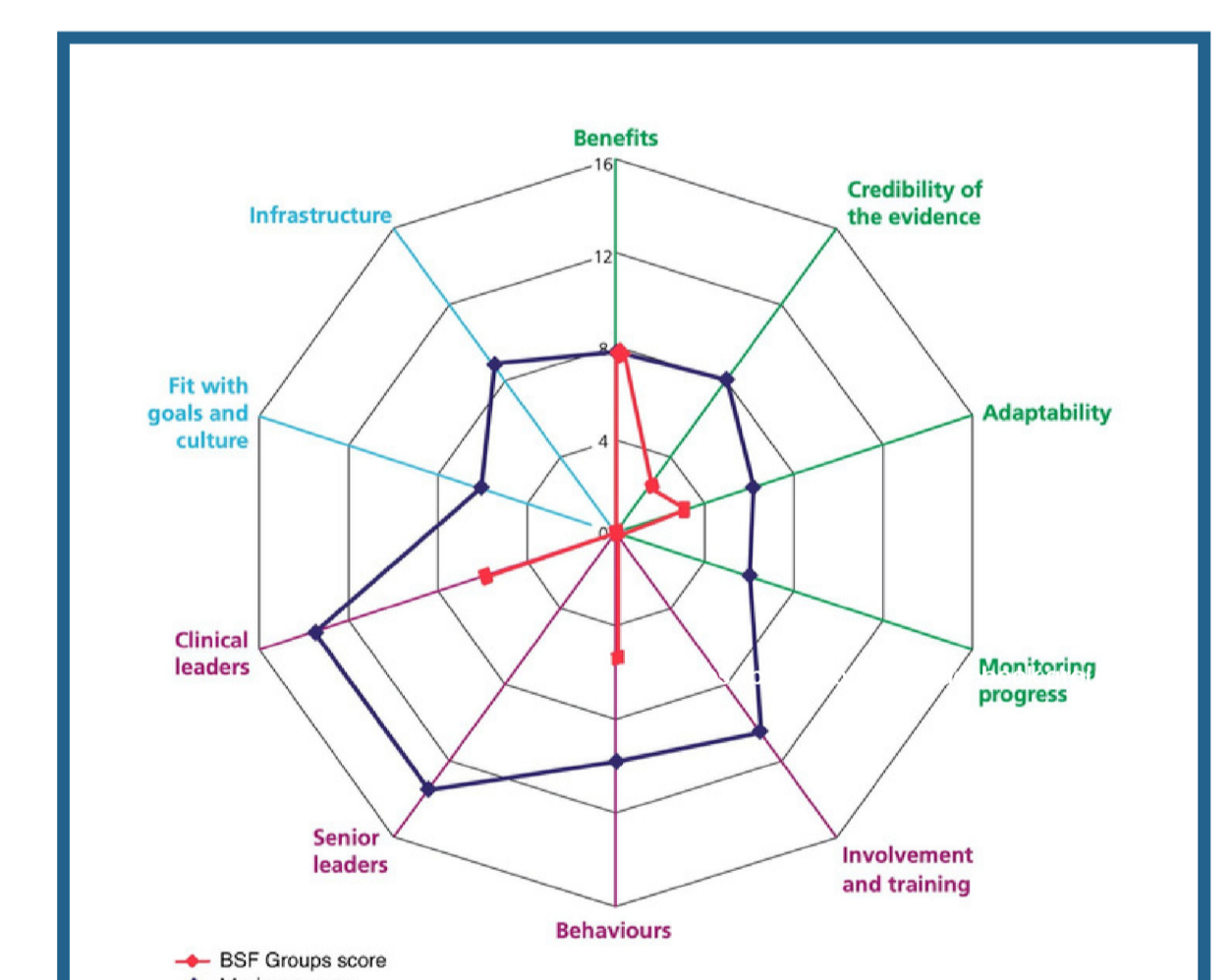
- Experiences of moderation can impact trust and perceptions of reliability
- Moderation by trained supporters increases confidence, reassurance and use
- Peer support is highly valued for social connection and shared experience
- Mothers credit group support with longer breastfeeding duration
- Provision of online support improves perceptions of local midwifery support



### 9 midwives facilitating/moderating Facebook groups participated in semi-structured interviews

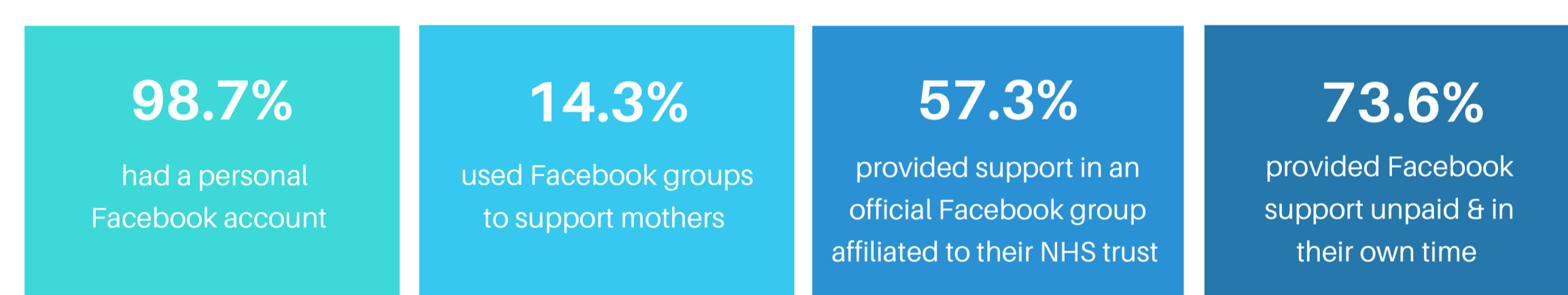
- Midwives passionate about breastfeeding are delivering online support in their own time
- There is a heterogeneity of services/group formats and lack of best practice development
- All formats have a significant reliance on volunteers to sustain online support services
- No midwife reported any operational requirements in place to measure or share impacts, or investment based on the benefits
- Midwives fear these services will become unsustainable despite positive impacts

### Sustainability modelling



- NHS Improvement tool (6) used to assess process, staff and organisation factors based on reported group formats
- Results highlight need for investment in processes, infrastructure, communication, staff and training

### 719 midwives & student midwives completed an online survey



- Midwives recognise the value of Facebook support to mothers
- Midwives fear that social media use will result in harm to mothers & themselves
- Experience of midwife moderation increases positive perceptions
- Midwives are largely providing this support unpaid, even within their employed role
- Training & guidance is needed to support midwives to engage safely online



## Conclusions

- Mothers value locally linked online breastfeeding support and seek collaboration between peer support and maternity services.
- Midwives recognise the social & informational value of Facebook support to mothers.
- Midwives seek support and training to safely and effectively engage on social media.
- Extending opportunities to provide Facebook breastfeeding support would benefit midwives, services and families.
- Best practice guidelines and training are needed.
- Consultation to revise local policy and invest in sustainable services in line with strategic goals is recommended.

The application of the knowledge, skill and passion of midwives to delivering support via social media needs wider exploration to ensure access is equitable, services are sustainable and midwives are supported, protected and remunerated in this developing role.

## References



## Associated Author Publications

