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Dear Stakeholder

You have previously expressed an interest in the issue of mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to reduce the incidence of neural tube defect affected pregnancies. I am writing to you now to advise you of the next steps the Department of Health intends to take about this issue.

The Parliamentary Secretary for Public Health (PS(PH)), Jane Ellison, has carefully considered the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition's advice, first submitted in 2006, and the evidence which is currently available. The benefits of mandatory fortification are clear for women of childbearing age but there are potential risks to the wider population in terms of the upper levels of folic acid intake. As you are aware, in recommending fortification of flour with folic acid the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition also advised that:

- action should be taken to reduce levels of voluntary fortification;
- measures should be in place for careful monitoring of the population with regard to folate intakes/status and adverse effects of long-term exposure to intakes of folic acid above the guideline upper level; and
- guidance on supplementation issued to specific population groups.

Mandatory fortification also raises issues about restriction of consumer choice. These concerns are reflected among our stakeholders whose views are polarised, and equally strongly held.

When taking a decision of this magnitude PS(PH) believes that the most up-to-date evidence needs to be taken into account and has therefore decided to wait for the blood folate status data for the population, which should be available early in 2015, before making a decision. In the meantime, she has asked Department of Health officials to discuss with the relevant food industry companies their willingness, in principle, to stop voluntary fortification of food products with folic acid, if mandatory fortification were to be introduced. This would be necessary to meet SACN's conditions that introduction of mandatory fortification should not result in a substantial increase in the numbers of people with intakes above the upper level, and that there should be no substantial increase in average intakes of folate. Officials will also explore whether there are any new and innovative communication approaches that would be effective in raising awareness among women, particularly those in lower socioeconomic groups who are at greater risk of an NTD affected pregnancy, of the need to take folic acid supplements, and promote behaviour change.

While I appreciate that you may be disappointed at the delay in making a decision, I hope you will be reassured that we are giving appropriate consideration to all the issues relating to mandatory fortification of flour.

Yours sincerely



Corinne Vaughan

Obesity & Food Policy Branch
