

# Scottish Directors of Public Health

## Statement on behalf of Scottish Directors of Public Health

### UK Consultation on Folate supplementation of Flour: Preventing Neural Tube Defects

The Directors of Public Health in Scotland welcome the announcement that the UK Government will consult on the mandatory fortification of flour with folate to reduce the risk of the birth defects spina bifida and anencephaly. These conditions – collectively called neural tube defects as they affect the brain, the spine and the spinal cord – are a major cause of death in the first day of life or of long-term disability. Yet neural tube defects are, in large part, preventable by folate supplementation.

We fully support the advice from Dr Catherine Calderwood, the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland and her counterparts in the UK nations, that there is an overwhelming case for the addition of folate to flour to reduce the risks of harm to the newest members of the Scottish population.

We would urge the Government to prepare and conduct a swift consultation. Clearly, mandatory fortification of flour with folate is something that needs to be considered as part of UK policy, while public health colleagues in Scotland are ready and able to support this work in reaching a speedy conclusion.

Dr Linda de Caestecker, Director of Public Health for Greater Glasgow and Clyde and lead DPH for child health said:

“We welcome the fact that the UK Government has responded to the wealth of evidence concerning the effectiveness of mandatory fortification and will now consult on taking action to prevent neural tube defects.

“Whilst the evidence underlines the effectiveness of adding folate to flour in reducing avoidable death and disability, we recognise the importance of such consultations in listening to all views before taking prompt action which affects the population as a whole.

“What is needed now is concerted action across the UK to advocate the need for such fortification and to make it happen quickly.”

**For inquiries, contact 0141 414 2888**

#### Notes for Editors

- 75% of women aged 16 and 49 years in the UK (81% in Scotland) have blood folate levels below the level recommended by WHO for prevention of neural tube defects;
- At least 150 babies in Scotland were born with, or found to have a neural tube defect, each year, leading to termination of the pregnancy, early death, or being

seriously damaged for life as a result of this preventable measure not being in place;

- There is now no evidence from a scientific view that contests the merits of folate supplementation;
- Expert advice from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) first made a recommendation in favour of folate supplementation over 12 years ago in 2006. Based on its updated 2017 risk assessment, the SACN continues to recommend fortification of flour with folic acid;
- Each CMO in the UK has expressed their support for this measure, and our own CMO in Scotland is a strong advocate; and
- There is strong evidence from countries that have flour folate supplementation that the benefits far outweigh the cost.

**24 October 2018**