

Use of Folic Acid in Pregnancy and Pre-conception.

An exploration of Mothers' motivation and uptake

healthwatch
Slough



Contents

Contents	1
Background and Scoping	2
Summary	3
Recomendations.....	3
Who did we talk to?	6
Findings.....	8
Focus Groups	14

Background and scoping

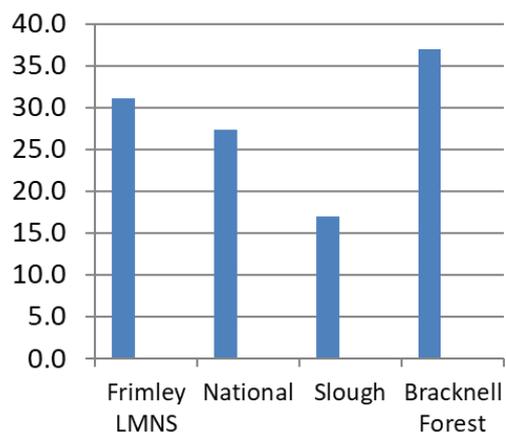
NHS advice states: *It's important to take a 400 micrograms folic acid tablet every day before you're pregnant and until you're 12 weeks pregnant.*

Folic acid can help prevent birth defects known as neural tube defects, including [spina bifida](#).

If you did not take folic acid before you conceived, you should start as soon as you find out you're pregnant.

Uptake of folic acid was low in Slough in 2018/ 2019. (Source [Frimley LMNS Perinatal Equity and Equality plan 2022](#)) Particularly in certain ethnic minority groups which may be contributing to poorer health outcomes in this cohort. Folic acid uptake in Slough was less than half that of Bracknell Forest .

Preconception folic acid rates (%)



Almost a third of all pregnancies within the Frimley area were in Slough – 72% of which were to non-UK born parents.

Frimley's perinatal equity strategy recognises the importance of working in partnership with local women and their families to address health inequalities.

This Healthwatch project and report seeks to understand the awareness, motivation, and barriers for women in communities of interest, asking them for their experiences and ideas to aid better understanding within the maternity system.

Summary

Of the women who took folic acid in Slough, 69% began taking it when they found out they were pregnant or after their first midwife appointment. There was a lack of awareness about the benefits of taking it during pre-conception and conception with only 31% beginning then.

For women who did not take folic acid during pregnancy, the reasons were varied. The common themes were, mis-understanding the benefits or lack of awareness.

Very few people (2) had heard about the offer of free vitamins that contain folic acid for pregnant women. This was the number one thing that women thought would encourage folic acid uptake in their community.

Women trusted health professionals the most when considering information about healthy pregnancy. However, many felt the message about folic acid could be delivered in community settings as well as healthcare settings.

Getting information to people considering pregnancy in the target groups could be challenging but the women we spoke to made valuable suggestions included in the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- **Promote availability of free vitamins that contain folic acid using a communications campaign available in multiple languages.**

Response from Frimley Local Maternity and Neonatal System. The Ready for Pregnancy folic acid and vitamin D resources were widely translated and shared across Slough and other areas. Promotion of free vitamins in Slough through the Healthy Start programme has increased uptake of the scheme, with post-natal information and communication campaigns contributing to this. Increasing rates of folic acid uptake in Slough has been an area of significant focus and we welcome this report which demonstrates improvements in uptake during the preconception period and offers areas to further explore.

- **Increase availability of free vitamins that contain folic acid to include women in the conception period by removing the requirement to produce a Healthy Start voucher. Tablets to be available at extended locations including GP receptions, maternity clinics, sexual health clinics and community spaces such as libraries and Mother's groups.**

Response from Frimley Local Maternity and Neonatal System. Frimley LMNS is continuing to progress work in collaboration with Slough Borough Council to expand distribution points in the maternity setting, including maternity hubs.

- **Poster campaign in GP waiting rooms and community spaces to promote folic acid use. Communications to focus on women who may be considering conception as well as in early pregnancy. Information to be available in multiple languages.**

Response from Frimley Local Maternity and Neonatal System. The Ready for Pregnancy campaign promoted translated information in a range of community settings. The translation of resources is an agreed priority for 2024/25 as part of the Frimley LMNS Perinatal Equity and Equality Plan, and the promotion of folic acid in patient-facing settings will continue to be revisited.

- **Involve women in community groups in the design of any communications materials.**

Response from Frimley Local Maternity and Neonatal System. The Frimley Maternity and Neonatal Voices Partnership (MNVP) Engagement Lead is embedded in a range of community groups, including Café Mama, and will continue to explore roles and forums to maximise communication and co-produce materials tailored to the community.

- **Recruit and train community maternity health champions in key groups in Slough such as Café Mama, Rhyme Time and Home-Start.**
- **Review information provided about folic acid in the email response to notification of pregnancy to ensure it is easy to understand and available in different languages.**

Response from Frimley Local Maternity and Neonatal System Clear information is available in the email response to the Notification of Pregnancy (NOP) form. Work is currently underway to have translated versions of the Notification of Pregnancy form and the response email.

- **Communications campaign around replacing contraception with folic acid tablets if people are planning to conceive.**
- **Investigate including folic acid messaging with contraceptives supplied by pharmacies and educate practice nurses and sexual health workers to share information about folic acid aligned with the 'make every contact count' approach to behaviour change.**
- **Consider using the postnatal health visitor contact, when contraception is discussed, to provide information about healthy pregnancy including folic acid.**

Response from Frimley Local Maternity and Neonatal System. Frimley LMNS will explore options for communication through a range of alternative routes and professionals.

- **Increase education in schools about healthy preparation for pregnancy, forming part of the PSHE curriculum delivered through school nurses.**

Response from Slough Borough Council Public Health Team

I am writing to extend our appreciation for allowing us the opportunity to respond to the Healthwatch Slough report. This report has offered the Public Health Children and Young People team with invaluable insights and actionable recommendations. It will play a crucial role in guiding Slough's efforts to enhance the uptake of folic acid intake and will serve as a cornerstone for planning evidence based Healthy Start folic acid campaigns in the future.

Who did we work with?

The issue of low rates of folic acid uptake prior to pregnancy and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy was a jointly identified priority, between Healthwatch Slough, Public Health, Frimley ICB and Maternity. Joint working with our external partners was necessary to achieve the desired outcomes.

We set up a working group which included Healthwatch, Public Health, Frimley & Wexham MNVP and Frimley LMNS (Local Maternity and Neonatal System).

We met in the set-up phase, implementation phase and the analysis and action phase.

At each stage, the working group came together discussing, evaluating, using our networks, sharing contacts, and focusing on outcomes towards a shared goal.

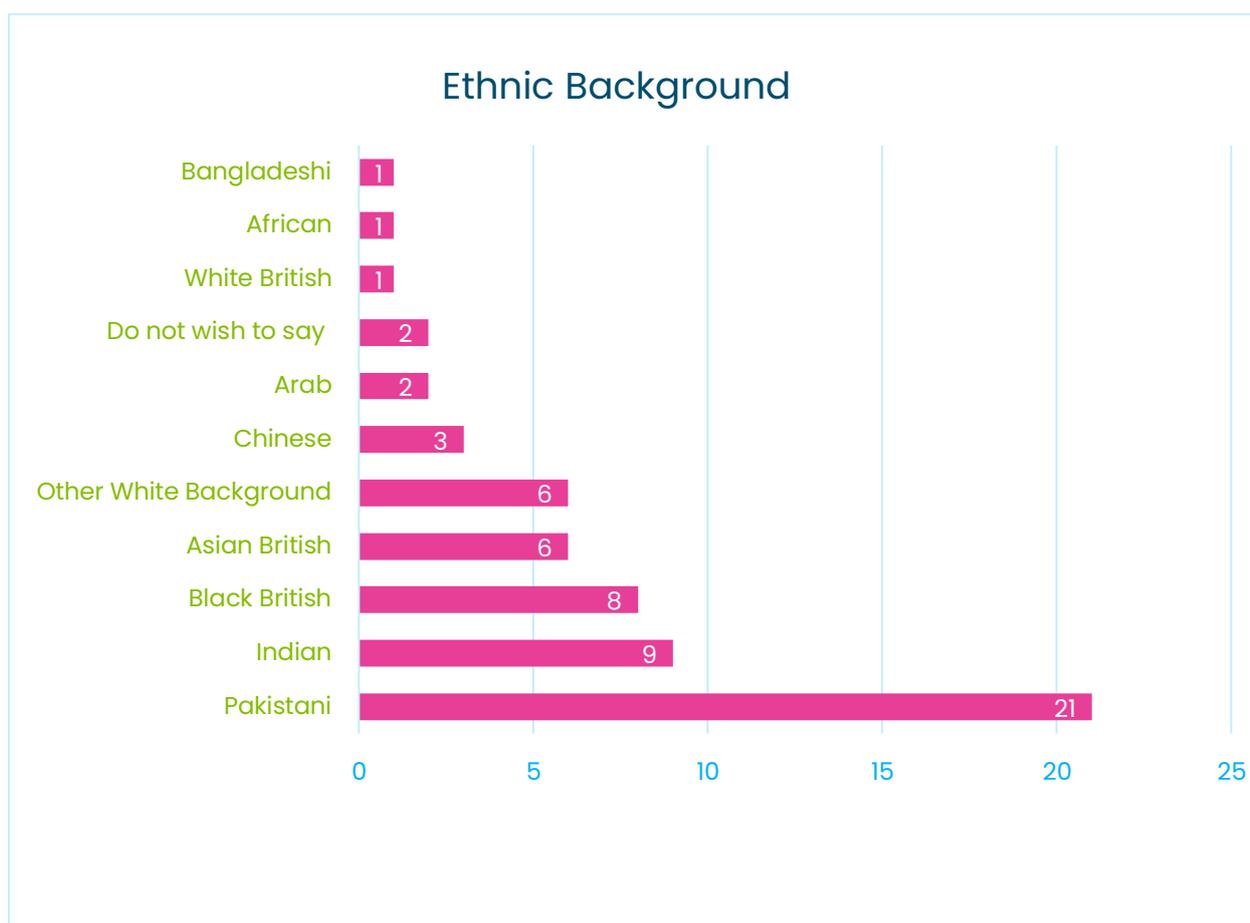


Who did we talk to?

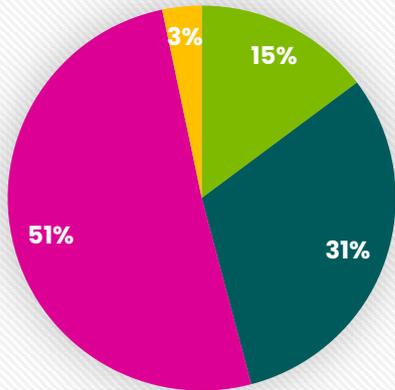
We conducted 51 interviews at the following locations.

Café Mama Jamia Masjid and Islamic Centre
Rhyme Time sessions at The Curve and Cippenham Libraries
Maternity clinics at Bath Road Maternity Hub
Maternity clinics at Lansdowne Maternity Hub

We spoke to 9 Mothers at an online focus group in partnership with Frimley and Wexham MNVP and 3 at a face-to-face focus group.

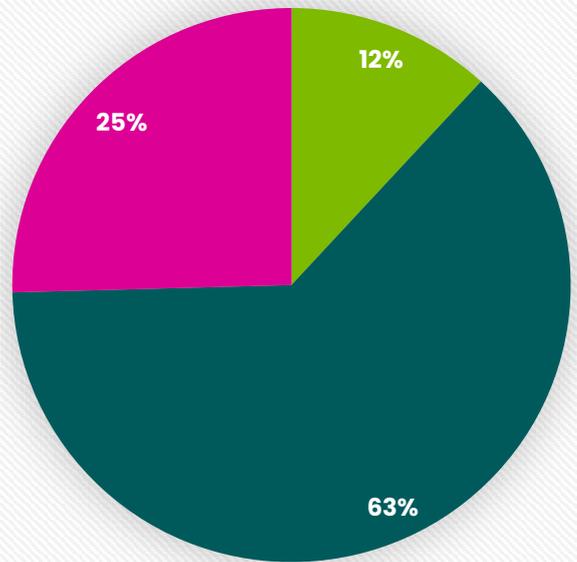


Pregnancy status



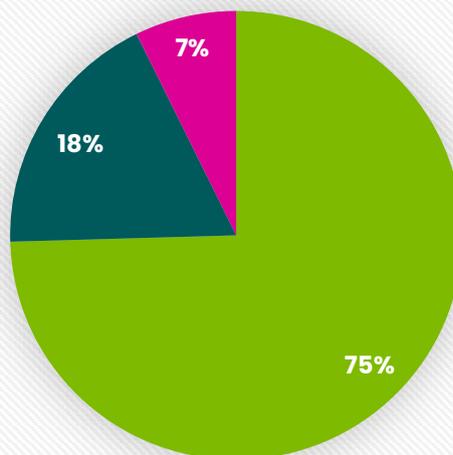
- Pregnant with first child
- Pregnant with subsequent child
- Mother (not pregnant)
- Have been pregnant before but had a miscarriage or stillbirth

Age



- 18-25
- 25-35
- 35 and over

Postcode



- SL1
- SL2
- SL3

Findings

Do you know about the benefits of taking folic acid when trying to conceive a baby?

80% of women we spoke to had heard of folic acid and knew it could benefit their baby, but most were not sure how.

“Yes, my midwife told me to take them, but I don't actually know why.”

Did you take folic acid when trying to conceive?

38% of women took folic acid when trying to conceive their current or last pregnancy. 62% did not.

Second time, or subsequent, parents were more likely to use folic acid in the conception period, perhaps due to increased knowledge gained during their first pregnancy.

Of those who did not take it during the conception period, the most common reason was lack of knowledge about the benefits. Other reasons given were unplanned pregnancy and feeling young and fit.

No, I did not know it was of benefit. I was upset when I fell pregnant and started doing my research. I found out I should have already been taking it.

Did you take folic acid during your last or current pregnancy?

83% of women we spoke to took folic acid during pregnancy, 17% did not.

Of those who did around half began taking them once they found out they were pregnant, varying from 3-12 weeks of pregnancy. The other half began taking it after their first appointment with the midwife.

People who didn't take folic acid told us about their reasons.

With my first pregnancy I was very young and didn't know anything about how to be healthy including folic acid. I had a miscarriage and think it could have been down to my poor health. My friends told me, before you

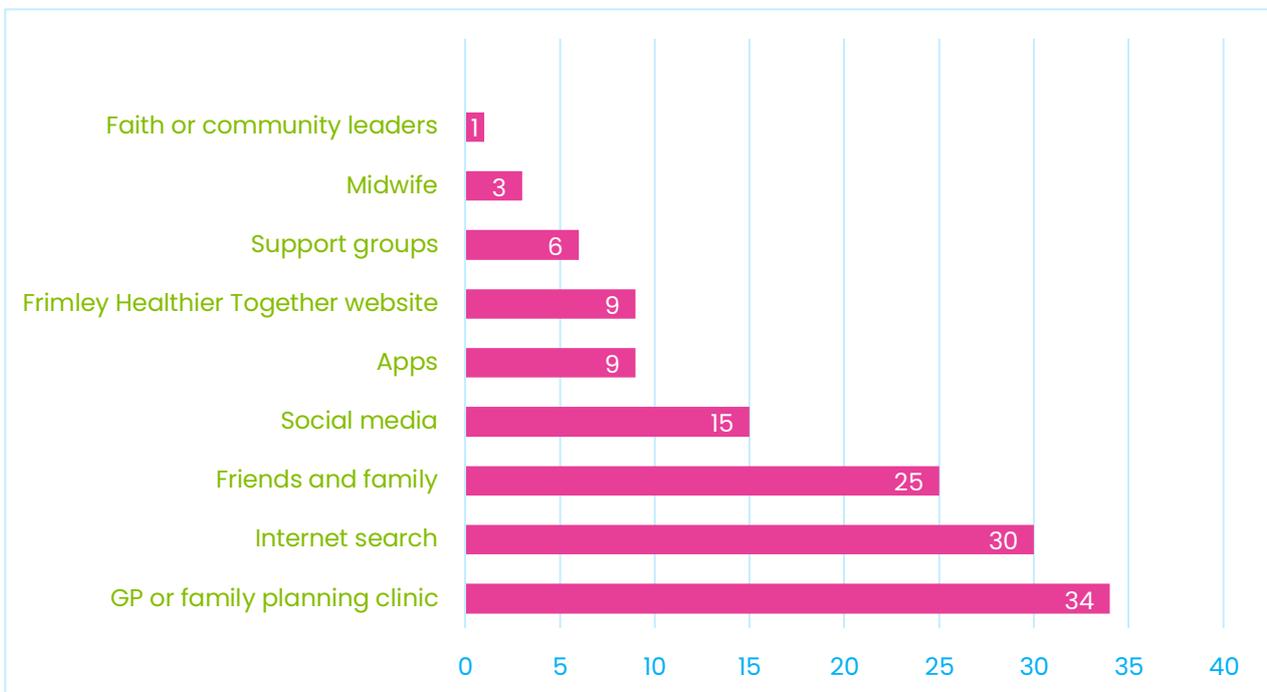
try again, take vitamins including folic acid and get yourself in a good position. The second time was a healthy pregnancy.

I did with my 1st and 4th baby but not the middle ones. With the first, I wanted to do everything right and with the last one I was just so run down and tired I knew I needed to think about my own health before another pregnancy.

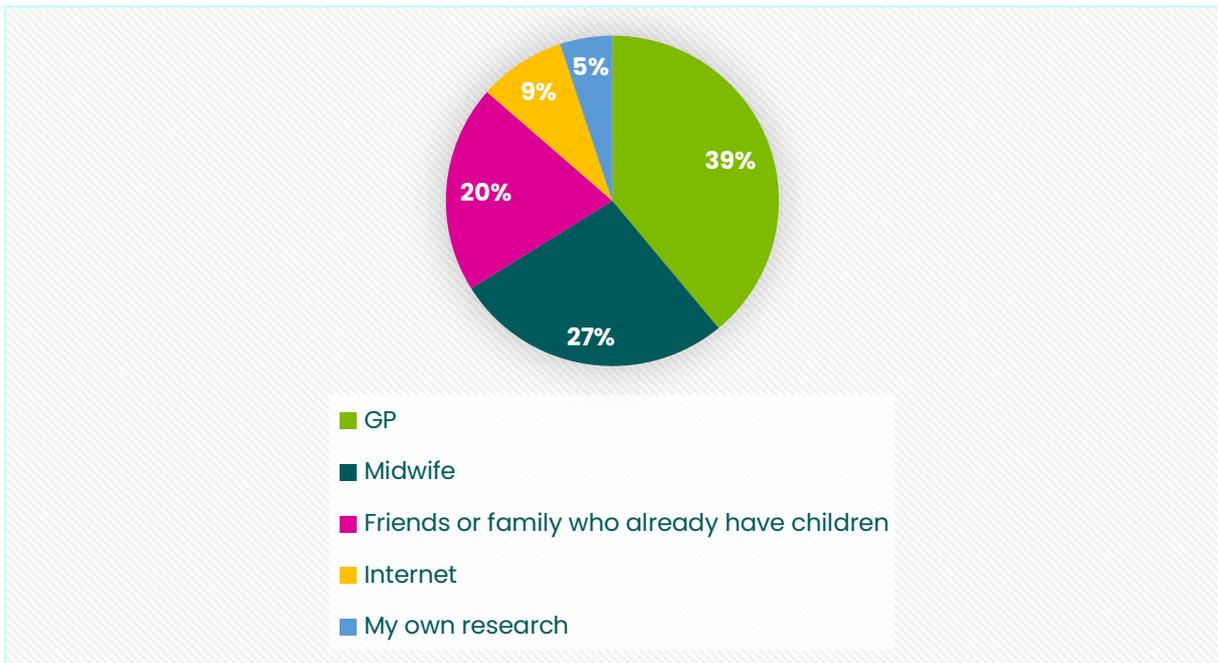
I didn't think we were 'trying for a baby'. Once I was married, I knew the expectation was to have a child so I wasn't taking contraception, but it wasn't on my mind that we would fall pregnant.

Where would you look for health information when planning to conceive a baby?

It was noted that people would like to consult a midwife but there was no way to do this prior to pregnancy.



Whose opinion do you value the most when searching for information about pregnancy?



People valued the opinion of health professionals most highly, followed by friends and family who have already had children.

Some people told us that they prefer to do their own research including looking at online sources.

“I always trust health professionals the most when looking for advice. It would be good to have people in the community who are able to provide information such as at the library group.”

“Friends and family first, there is nothing better than discussing pregnancy and health with people who have been through it themselves and know you.”

Would any of these things have encouraged you to take folic acid when trying to conceive and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy?



Please tell us about anything else that affected your decision about taking folic acid or anything you think could raise awareness of the benefits in your community.

Free vitamins

- "It would be good if they were free."
- "Free vitamins would help, my friend had to give up work and it would help people like her."
- "Tablets can be very expensive £8-9 so having free vitamins would really help."
- "If you are going to offer free tablets, make it really accessible."

Midwife/GP

- "Folic acid should be given at midwife appointments not an extra job to collect from the children's centre, there isn't one near me."
- "I was told to take it by my midwife and GP but didn't really know why."

- “In Dubai I saw the same doctor for every pregnancy appointment and the birth, so we built up trust. Having a different midwife every time in my second, UK based, pregnancy meant we didn't develop a relationship. It would be much easier to ask questions and listen to advice if I had consistency of care.”
- “It would be good to have a checkup at the GP before planning a baby so they could let you know if you are healthy and any issues addressed, I was deficient in vitamin B12, and it affected my health throughout the pregnancy.”

Pregnacare (branded pregnancy vitamins)

- “I took Pregnacare I know it's expensive but that was not going to stop me taking them.”
- “I would rather take the vitamins that had everything in it.”
- “I did not know I could get free vitamins, may go and see children's centre now as Pregnacare is so expensive.”

More Information

- “There should be more information available to women of childbearing age or, like me, they won't know about the benefit of taking folic acid before/ during conception. Posters in the GP surgery and contraception clinics would be best. Something very eye-catching with a simple message in multiple languages and QR code for more info.”
- “I think people are confused about the difference between folates and folic acid. They may not have access to the best information.”
- “Language is a barrier.”
- “There should be more available in the community, like here at the library as they have a captive audience.”
- “There should be leaflets in the GP surgery about folic acid. Giving information to community groups to share.”
- “Most important is to give information in the community. It is so difficult to take everything in when you go for midwife or GP appointments. People are overwhelmed with information. When you come to a community group like Café Mama you are more relaxed and more able to retain information.”

Community groups could spread the word about staying healthy at all stages of reproductive life. It would be good to have some messages about- if you are not using contraception, replace it with folic acid and other vitamins.

Focus groups

We held an online focus group to engage with pregnant people and parents who may be unable to attend face to face groups.

We ran this session in conjunction with Wexham Maternity and Neonatal Voices.

The Frimley & Wexham Maternity and Neonatal Voices Partnership (MNVP) listens to the experiences of women and families, and brings together service users, staff, and other stakeholders to plan, review and improve maternity and neonatal care.

The MNVP ensures that service users' voices are at the heart of decision-making in maternity and neonatal services which influences improvements in the safety, quality, and experience of maternity and neonatal care.'

9 Mothers attended.

We discussed taking vitamins and folic acid. One woman was not taking folic acid or vitamins, she stated that she didn't think she needed to, she felt fine. Most women were taking folic acid or a vitamin supplement that contained it. They were recommended to take supplements by their GP or Midwife and five people began taking them after their pregnancy was confirmed.

Three women began taking them when they were trying to conceive.

When discussing the benefits one person said,

I started taking Folic Acid, Vitamin B12, D and Vitamin C because they help my baby to develop its nervous system, skeleton and absorption of iron from my diet.

Others knew that taking vitamins and folic acid could benefit them but did not know how.

We spoke about where they got advice about healthy pregnancy. People valued the opinions of friends who had recently had babies or their own Mother. Others mentioned midwives and 'The NHS' as trusted sources.

The NHS website was mentioned for providing good quality information. Online pregnancy forums on Reddit or Facebook were helpful for some women to find out more. One woman did not feel like she had received good advice and said it had affected her confidence.

The group discussed that good quality information early in pregnancy, or before, was important.

Information is important, because pregnancy is a time when you are learning new things, so I think women will want to be assured of the safety of taking tablets and know the importance of taking them.

One person told us about multiple ways they gathered information about folic acid.

I took information from friends who told me and my husband. I looked online, social media and Google, collective knowledge from different places. I feel it's important that men also know about Folic Acid and maybe it should be taught in school.

We discussed the best way for them to receive this information.

Posters in maternity clinics, with a QR code for more information was suggested and the group agreed that this would be helpful. Discussion with the midwife at the first appointment (booking appointment) was also mentioned. One participant said that posters should be 'everywhere, so people didn't miss the message.'

The group were aware that midwives were under pressure and may not have the time to share as much information as was needed. However, they felt that they would be the best people to do so,

People are not aware, or some people don't have access to information, so I feel it's the role of midwives, nurses, and doctors to give it to them.

Another group member enjoyed the online focus group and thought something similar would be a good opportunity to pass on the message.

A suggestion was made to offer community support to enlighten people outside the hospital, using community spaces and asking couples to come and give talks.

When asked about what they felt would encourage more women to take folic acid and other vitamins the group thought that easy access to free tablets would make the most difference.

We held a face-to-face focus group in Slough town centre. 3 women attended.

All 3 women had heard about the benefits folic acid and took it through their pregnancy.

One woman told Healthwatch that she conceived and had her first baby in India, she only found out she was pregnant when she visited the doctor who then put her on folic acid. She was happy with the care she received, and her doctor provided good information. She returned to the UK and stated the care she had when she had her second child was very different. She had to find information on Google and had different midwives throughout her pregnancy, which was not consistent.

The women said that they normally would ask the GP or midwife for information but felt that there was not a lot of information around locally in the area they live. They value their family health information but are aware that family information might not be up to date, they also look at social media and websites.

They did not know about Healthy Start. Again, they felt there was a lack of information and not knowing where to go or what was on offer could affect people's care.

They felt community spaces like the Curve would be great places to raise awareness as many women can then go and pass this information on in their own communities. They felt it was up to them to seek out information and do their own research.



Unit 49, Aerodrome Studios, Airfield Way, Christchurch, Dorset, BH23 3TS

www.healthwatchslough.co.uk

t: 0300 0120184

e: enquiries@healthwatchslough.co.uk

 [@https://twitter.com/HWSlough](https://twitter.com/HWSlough)

 <https://www.facebook.com/HealthwatchSlough>