

REPORT TO: Health and Wellbeing Board
DATE: 9 July 2014
REPORTING OFFICER: Director of Public Health
PORTFOLIO: Health and Wellbeing
SUBJECT: Healthy Start Programme – Vitamins
WARD(S): Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To provide information on a pilot to increase the provision and distribution of Healthy Start vitamins in Halton.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That the Board

- 1) notes the content of the report; and**
- 2) supports the proposals to pilot the universal distribution of Healthy Start vitamins to all pregnant and breastfeeding women (regardless of income) and to all infants at six months of age.**

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Healthy Start Programme is a Department of Health-funded programme that provides low-income families which include a pregnant woman or a child under the age of four years (and all pregnant women under the age of 18 years), with vouchers to spend on food and to exchange for vitamins.
- 3.2 Weekly food vouchers can be spent on milk, fruit and vegetables, or infant formula milk. Eligible pregnant women (more than 10 weeks pregnant) and those with a baby under the age of one year are entitled to free maternal vitamins. Children aged between six months and four years are entitled to vouchers for free vitamin drops. Each voucher is exchanged for an eight-week supply of vitamins.
- 3.3 Healthy Start vitamins contain the recommended amount of vitamin A, C and D for young children, and folic acid and vitamin C and D for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Healthy Start vitamins are intended to supplement the diets of low-income children and mothers, whose diets are more likely to be deficient in key vitamins.
- 3.4 Vitamin A is used by the body to fight infection, and is also important for ensuring good vision in dim light. Vitamin C boosts immunity and aids wound

healing. Vitamin D is essential for healthy teeth and bones and prevention of rickets. Vitamin D status in infants is determined by both exposure to sunlight and maternal vitamin D status during pregnancy. Folic acid supplementation is recommended for all pregnant women, and can reduce the incidence of neural tube defects, including spina bifida. This means that adequate maternal vitamin intake during pregnancy is crucially important for infant health.

- 3.5 Nationally, there has been an increase in the incidence of infant rickets. Although levels in Halton are not as high as other areas due to the proportion of mothers who use formula milk, there is a need to encourage expectant mothers to breastfeed their babies and provide the maximum support for breastfeeding mothers.
- 3.6 In Halton, Healthy Start vitamins are currently distributed via two health centres in Runcorn, and two health centres in Widnes. The Healthy Start Programme requires pregnant women and new mothers to register for the scheme, after which they receive vouchers which are exchanged for vitamins on a bottle-by-bottle basis. The numbers accessing the scheme are very low equating to less than 1% of all pregnant women, new mothers and infants.
- 3.7 Until recently pregnant women and new mothers who were ineligible for the voucher scheme were able to purchase Healthy Start vitamins from NHS Trusts at a much lower cost than branded vitamins sold on the high street. However, due to regulatory changes NHS Trusts will no longer be able to do this and there is concern that this could have a significant impact on the numbers accessing the recommended vitamins. This lack of vitamin supplementation is likely to have a detrimental effect on the nutritional status of new mothers and infants within the borough.
- 3.8 It is proposed that Healthy Start vitamins are distributed free of charge to all pregnant and breast feeding women in the Borough regardless of income via midwives, health visitors and through the children's centre network and one bottle of vitamins is provided to all infants at six months of age.
- 3.9 It is proposed that this pilot will run from 1st August 2014 to 31st August 2015.
- 3.10 The existing voucher scheme for low income families will continue and it is proposed that the availability of the voucher scheme is extended to Children's Centres, which are at the heart of local communities, to increase access and encourage take up. An awareness raising campaign will help promote both the universal availability of free vitamins and the voucher scheme for eligible infants.
- 3.10 The cost of the scheme, based on an initial 90% uptake rate with 'fall off' among subsequent uptake is estimated at £5,325.12. There has been a clear rationale to the calculation of these uptake rates, based on evidence consisting of research and current local intelligence. The cost of the promotional marketing campaign will be £2,500.

- 3.11 The move to universal provision of maternal vitamins for mothers will contribute to improving the nutritional status of the most vulnerable mothers and children in the borough, who are at most risk of vitamin deficiency. This 'invest to save' strategy will reduce rates of infectious disease within the borough and has the potential to reduce rates of health services use. Greater uptake of maternal Healthy Start vitamins will subsequently reduce infants' risk of developing rickets due to vitamin D deficiency, protect against spina bifida and improve mothers' immune systems to help protect them from infectious diseases. Improving vitamin D status will also increase calcium absorption, preventing dental caries.
- 3.12 Evidence suggests that universal provision is the most cost-effective strategy for improving uptake among eligible groups. Universal provision will increase awareness of the scheme among health professionals, and will ensure that they prioritise the scheme, overcoming barriers to access for pregnant women and new mothers.

4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The Healthy Start vitamins programme forms part of the Healthy Child programme. It will improve population health within Halton thereby contributing to the Child Development priority within Halton's Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

5 OTHER/FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The total cost of the scheme is £7,825. It will cost £5,325 to deliver the Healthy Start vitamins to pregnant women on a universal basis (at a majority uptake rate). The cost of the promotional marketing campaign will be £2,500. This funding will be from the Public Health budget.

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

All issues outlined in this report focus directly on this priority.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

No direct implications have been identified.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

All issues outlined in this report focus directly on this priority. The Healthy Start vitamins programme will reduce inequalities in nutritional intake in Halton.

6.4 A Safer Halton

No direct implications have been identified.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

No direct implications have been identified.

7 RISK ANALYSIS

- 7.1 Children who are deficient in vitamins – particularly vitamin C – are at risk of increased hospital admissions because they have a lowered ability to fight infections. Children who are vitamin deficient are at increased risk of nutrition-related disorders such as rickets. The recommendations do not require a full risk assessment.

8 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

- 8.1 The scheme will have a positive impact on pregnant women and low income families.

9 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None

Compiled by: Julia Rosser, Public Health Consultant; Beth Milton, Speciality Registrar in Public Health; and Delima Khairudin, F2 Doctor.