

BUSINESS FILE

HFMA UPDATE

Martin Last, Director General



The power of media

The first quarter of 2025 has seen attention given to the work schedules of our UK Government and those overseas. The objectives are growth and economic prosperity and present challenges along that path. We are seeing global events impact any change and appear from a variety of sources.

The HFMA has been campaigning since the 1970s to further the education of women of childbearing age to the benefits of supplementing 400mcg of folic acid for at least a month prior to possible conception until 12 weeks of pregnancy to reduce the risk of neural tube defects (NTDs). The HFMA is fully supportive of the proposed measure to add 250mcg folic acid per 100g non-wholemeal wheat flour from autumn 2026 so long as this education message continues to be communicated.

It is often said the best public education occurs via soap opera storylines. In January, the press picked up on the latest episode of *Call the Midwife*, currently set in the 1970s, which covered the story of a baby born with Spina bifida. This resulted in a massive surge of visits to the NHS website, which covers the condition and contains information regarding folic acid. Resulting press coverage included positive quotes from Baroness Merron, Minister for Patient Safety, Women's Health and Mental Health, and whom HFMA has spoken with on this topic. This has been a positive boost to this

campaign to improve women's health.

On the downside, we had disappointing news from the European Ombudsman on labelling of foodstuffs that contains probiotics as health claims. The Ombudsman's decision ruled that the term probiotics could only be used if supported by a scientifically assessed health claim by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Since EFSA has not yet approved any claims for probiotics due to their concern to the absence of sufficient scientific data, it means the term continues to not be allowed to be used. The ruling also found there was no malpractice with regards to the Commission's interpretation of EU food legislation, and that they are ensuring a high level of consumer protection.

Before the ruling, there had been a developing easing of interpretation by around 11 EU member states, which continued to use the term probiotics. One of the outcomes of the case is that it suggests the Commission should take further steps to bring member states into line with this ruling. This legal case was brought by a trade association, which described themselves as representing the interests of the European probiotic industry but unfortunately who had little consultation with the rest of industry on it. There is no discussion as to whether or how this may impact in practice, but the HFMA will continue to monitor and are now seeking a new approach

to help manage this set back.

In politics, Kier Starmer has now laid out policies for 'Britain Reconnected'. This lays out policies to make Britain strong on the world stage, enable pursuit of GB national interest, and to act progressively by re-engaging with Europe. This seeks to reset EU relationships to improve the UK's trade and investment by removing trade barriers. It does not mean a return to the single market, customs union, or freedom of movement but related to food issues, it will seek to negotiate veterinary agreements to prevent unnecessary border checks and help tackle the cost of food. Recent Government meetings have indicated the authorities are looking closely at how this may develop and to assess possible impacts on other areas of EU legislation. There appears to be a common theme that convergence of EU law with UK law is desired wherever possible, although in practice this may not always be practical. Through our political advisors, Cavendish, the HFMA has a programme of ministerial engagement that is being rolled out throughout 2025 and is monitoring developments as they emerge.

Britain Reconnected is not just a European initiative but affects our relationships with all overseas partners. Starmer refers to our special relationship with the USA and that they remain an indispensable ally. Since taking office, President Trump stated he plans sweeping

reviews of US trade policy and to impose tariffs on products, not just from USA's immediate neighbours, but from countries around the world. So, whereas Keir Starmer's approach is to seek removal of trade barriers, it would seem that Trump intends to impose protectionist policies. At time of writing, it was widely reported this could spark a global trade war. Its effect on EU or UK trading is as yet still to be established.

Furthermore, whilst other previous US administrations have sought to provide confidence and calmness for the economic markets, Trump's approach appears rather unconventional and could be being adopted for reasons other than fiscal. Whatever the implications, I believe we are likely to see a rise in countries seeking to agree trade deals with the USA to secure lower cost and, it could be assumed likely, that many countries will be reviewing their trading policies to find alternative trading partners or reduce their reliance on the USA. To me, this further demonstrates how influential and powerful decisions taken in one place can affect us all, and at all levels. Whatever that may impact, I can assure you the HFMA remain vigilant and engaged to help our industry through potential changes and they are monitored regularly.

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