**Informing public health messages and strategies to raise awareness of pre-conception health: a public consultation**

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**Summary**

**Background** Despite growing scientific and policy recognition that optimising health before a potential pregnancy (ie, pre-conception health) improves the lifelong health of reproductive-aged people and any children that they might have, public awareness of pre-conception health is lacking. To inform appropriate public health messages and strategies to increase public awareness, this project aimed to develop recommendations on language use, and identify and prioritise strategies.

**Methods** A public consultation was undertaken through semistructured online group discussions with people (of any gender) aged 18–50 years in England who were not currently expecting a child. Public contributors were recruited through patient and public involvement groups, Facebook support groups (eg, for people with fertility issues or chronic conditions), and an LGBTQ+ charity. The first round of discussions (4 February–25 March, 2021) explored public contributors’ knowledge about pre-conception health, their recommendations on appropriate language for public health messages, and ideas on public health strategies. All contributors were invited for a second discussion round (24-28 May, 2021) to refine the language recommendations and prioritise the suggested strategies. Discussions were summarised based on notes taken by two researchers. Ethics approval was not required for this public consultation.

**Findings** 54 people joined the first discussion round. Of these, 36 participated in the second round (24 [67%] female, seven [19%] male, five [14%] transgender or non-binary; 13 [36%] from an ethnic minority background). Discussions confirmed a substantial lack of awareness of pre-conception health, but also revealed curiosity and an interest to learn more. Agreed language recommendations included avoiding unfamiliar terms without further explanation (eg, pre-conception health, medical terms); using language that is positive, encouraging, inclusive, and gender-neutral when possible; and using messages that are specific and realistic. School-based education and social media campaigns supported by a trusted source such as the NHS emerged as strategic priorities.

**Interpretation** This public consultation revealed a desire among diverse groups to learn about pre-conception health and normalise preparation for pregnancy. The views obtained were predominantly from public contributors living in the Southampton area, and did not include people of reproductive age below 18 years (ie, aged 15-17). Raising public awareness about pre-conception health should begin in schools and will require adaptation of curricula, alongside development of public awareness campaigns, to reach all people across their reproductive years. Further research is needed to inform and develop these initiatives.

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**Contributors**

DAJMS conceived the idea and designed the project with contributions from all authors. DAJMS developed public consultation content with input from OG, CB, BJ, JH, and JS. DAJMS, OG, CB, BJ, and JH contributed to recruitment of public contributors. Public consultations were facilitated by DAJMS, with support from OG, ET, and BJ. DAJMS drafted the Abstract, and all authors contributed to interpretation of the findings and revision of the Abstract.

**Declaration of interests**

We declare no competing interests.