

# De-medicalising gluten-free products through a subsidy card scheme: a qualitative study of service users

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

Coeliac disease is an autoimmune condition requiring a lifelong gluten-free diet. In Wales, gluten-free foods are prescribed, but pre-paid subsidy cards are being explored as a cost-effective alternative. A 2018 pilot by Hywel Dda University Health Board involved 123 participants across nine GP practices, with 86% preferring the card over prescriptions due to greater choice and convenience.

However, some opted out, citing limited financial benefits and product availability. The subsidy cards scheme was fully implemented by the Hywel Dda board in 2019, but further research is needed to assess its impact on patients' quality of life, its economic implications, and the barriers faced by those who continue to use prescriptions.

## Aim

The aim of this study is to explore service users' views on the use of pre-paid subsidy cards in place of prescriptions, including both those who were invited to take part in the HDUHB pilot and those who have and have not been offered to participate in the scheme to date.

## Specific objectives were to explore:

- **experiences** of current services received (prescription or subsidy card)
- **impact** of current methods of accessing GFF on daily life
- perceived **benefits and disadvantages** of switching to a pre-paid subsidy card
- **barriers and facilitators** to participation in a pre-paid subsidy card scheme
- **main priorities** regarding access to gluten-free products – what matters most to individuals?
- **recommendations** for future roll-out
- **reasons for declining** to participate (for those who declined to participate in the HDUHB pilot scheme)

## Methods

This qualitative study used semi-structured Zoom interviews (April–July 2024) to explore views of individuals eligible for the subsidy card scheme in HDUHB and those potentially eligible in a future Wales-wide roll-out. Researchers followed an interview schedule to ensure key topics were covered, with all interviews recorded.

## Key Findings

This study included 29 participants from all seven health boards in Wales. Of these, 23 were personally eligible for gluten-free food (GFF) provision, while six managed GFF for others. Participants from health boards without the subsidy card scheme and two from Hywel Dda University Health Board (HDUHB) who declined the card, highlighted benefits of prescriptions,

including financial savings, guaranteed access to essentials, and convenience. However, issues like complicated ordering, product unavailability, and food waste were drawbacks.

Among HDUHB participants in the subsidy card scheme, most praised its flexibility, increased product variety, and ease of use, citing reduced financial strain and enhanced social inclusion. Some challenges included card restrictions, difficulty checking balances, and limited rural access to GFF products.

Participants from other health boards expressed interest in the card's benefits, such as improved dietary options, but raised concerns about its value in the current economic climate, potential misuse, and rural access barriers. Most (70%) were interested in switching to the subsidy card, while a minority expressed ambivalence or reluctance.

### **Key Priorities**

Six key priorities for improving access to GFF and better supporting people with coeliac disease were identified:

1. Ease of Access
2. Variety & freedom of choice
3. Tasty and healthy diet
4. Consistency
5. Cost
6. Better awareness & education of coeliac disease