

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

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## Background

Coeliac disease requires a strict **gluten-free** diet to prevent complications.

Gluten-free foods (GFF) were initially **prescribed** by GPs and dispensed at pharmacies, due to limited availability.

Now widely available, Hywel Dda University Health Board offer a GFF subsidy card for patients to access the foods they need in shops other than pharmacies.



## Study Aim

Explore views on **pre-paid subsidy cards** as replacement for prescriptions, including views of:

1. Users who took part in the card scheme
2. Individuals who have never participated in the scheme



## Objectives

To explore..

- **experiences** with both prescriptions & card scheme
- **impact** of current **method of access** of gluten-free foods on daily life
- perceived **benefits and disadvantages** of switching to a pre-paid subsidy card
- **barriers and facilitators** to participation
- **main priorities** regarding access to gluten-free products – *what matters most to individuals?*
- **recommendations** for future roll-out
- **reasons for declining** to participate in the pilot scheme



## Method

Qualitative data collection was carried out between April and July 2024, involving:

- semi-structured **zoom interviews**
- participants **eligible** for the card scheme
- participants potentially **eligible in future** Wales-wide roll-out

An **interview schedule** was used to ensure **key topics** were covered.

# Participants

## Of the 29 focus group participants

- 23 were eligible for gluten-free foods
- 6 managed gluten-free foods for others
- 4 of the participants had taken part in the pilot card scheme
- All 7 health boards were represented in the sample

Participants reported a range of disability status, educational attainment, employment status, and personal income range.

# Key Findings

## Prescriptions

### Benefits

- Financial savings
- Guaranteed access to essentials
- Convenience

### Challenges

- Complicated ordering
- Product unavailability
- Food waste from disliked food



## Pre-paid subsidy cards

### Benefits

- Flexibility & product variety
- Reduced financial strain
- Enhanced social inclusion

### Challenges

- Card restrictions
- Difficulty checking balances
- Limited rural access to food through supermarkets



**Most participants (70%) were interested in switching to the subsidy card,** while a minority were not interested or reluctant.



## Key Priorities

Six key priorities for improving access to gluten-free foods and better supporting people with coeliac disease were identified:



Ease of access



Consistency



Variety & freedom of choice



Cost



Tasty and healthy diet



Better awareness & education of coeliac disease

The full report is available to view here:

<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2024.12.09.24318385v1>