

**Press Release**

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**CUTS TO GLUTEN-FREE PRESCRIPTIONS BY  
EAST LANCASHIRE AND BLACKBURN WITH DARWEN CCGS  
IGNORE NICE QUALITY STANDARDS AND COULD COST THE NHS  
MORE IN THE LONG RUN**

Coeliac UK is strongly opposing proposed cuts to gluten-free prescriptions for patients across the region following the announcement of a joint consultation by East Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs).

Details of the proposed cuts were announced shortly before a new National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [quality standard on coeliac disease](#) was published which highlights that enabling access to gluten-free food on prescription supports adherence to the gluten-free diet for vulnerable patients. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 sets out a clear expectation that the care system should consider NICE quality standards in planning and delivering services.

Sarah Sleet, chief executive of Coeliac UK, the national charity for people with coeliac disease said: "As NICE quality standards are developed in line with clinical evidence and expert consensus, it is clear that the proposal by East Lancashire and Blackburn with Darwen CCGs to remove vital front-line services, is being based on budget rather than patient need or clinical evidence. Cutting gluten-free prescribing exacerbates health inequalities, further disadvantaging the most vulnerable patients with coeliac disease."

Coeliac disease is a serious autoimmune condition caused by a reaction to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye. The charity believes any cuts to gluten-free prescriptions will leave vulnerable patients with coeliac disease without support which will affect their ability to stick to the gluten-free diet, which is the only treatment for the condition. The potential serious long term health complications of not maintaining a gluten-free diet include osteoporosis, infertility and, in some rare cases, small bowel cancer, conditions that could cost the NHS a lot more in the long run.

Last year East Lancashire CCG spent £205,998 and Blackburn with Darwen CCG spent £110,000 on prescribed gluten-free foods for all patients in the region. The consultation runs until the 11 November 2016 and the online survey can be found at:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/gfconsultation> .

The charity would like to encourage all those that might be affected to complete the questionnaire so that their opinions are heard.

The charity refutes the claim in the by the CCG which states:

*'There is a much wider range of food available and gluten-free alternatives are now readily available and prices have come down'.*

“For someone medically diagnosed with coeliac disease there is no choice but to stick to a gluten-free diet, day in day out for life and so access to gluten-free staples is critical, and is not as easy as you might think. The expansion of Free From aisles in large supermarkets masks the reality of very patchy provision. Research published last year noted that gluten-free food in budget supermarkets stocked no gluten-free food, and that these stores tended to be frequented by people on lower incomes. Additionally, high prices make such products unaffordable for some,” continued Ms Sleet.

Whilst gluten-free food staples such as pasta, are three to four times more expensive than comparable gluten-containing products, gram for gram, gluten-free bread is **six times** more expensive\* than regular gluten containing bread in the supermarket. On top of this availability is limited in rural areas, discount supermarkets and small stores. Having access to gluten-free staple foods on prescription provides an essential level of support to individuals trying to keep to the gluten-free diet which is the only treatment for coeliac disease.

Coeliac UK is also concerned over this comment in the consultation document where it states:

*'There are a number of naturally gluten-free carbohydrates which are widely available that can be used instead of foods like bread and pasta. These include rice, potatoes and flour alternatives such as millet and corn flour.'*

“Simply switching to alternative carbs such as rice and potatoes risks malnutrition with bread alone providing between 10 and 20% of our most important nutrients such as protein, calcium and iron but potatoes and rice only providing a fraction of this,” explained Ms Sleet.

NICE has calculated that the cost of gluten-free food to the NHS equates to £194.24<sup>1</sup> per diagnosed patient per year, making it an extremely low cost treatment that addresses potential health inequality in the management of coeliac disease due to the higher cost and limited availability of gluten-free food.

“The provision of gluten-free staple food on prescription is a vital element of the support offered to all patients by the NHS and it is essential to prevent long term damage to health,” continued Ms Sleet.

In England, prescriptions for gluten-free food are not free of charge unless someone already qualifies for free prescriptions. Currently 60% of CCGs across the country adhere to National Prescribing Guidelines, providing recommendations for GPs and policymakers on

reasonable amounts of gluten-free staple foods such as bread, flour and pasta per patient per month.

Ends

<sup>1</sup> Based on NICE Guidance NG20 Appendix G: Full Health Economics Report, 2015 annual cost of £194.94 for 40 years, figures not adjusted for inflation. Typical age at diagnosis 30-35yrs, average age span in the UK 70-75yrs.

#### Notes to editor

- Coeliac disease is a serious illness where the body's immune system reacts to gluten found in food, making the body attack itself.
- 1 in 100 people in the UK has coeliac disease
- A wide range of case studies are available on request from Coeliac UK.
- Average time to diagnosis is 13 years.
- 1 in 4 people diagnosed with coeliac disease had previously been diagnosed with IBS.
- Gluten is a protein found in wheat (including spelt), rye and barley. Some people are also sensitive to oats. Obvious sources of gluten include breads, pastas, flours, cereals, cakes and biscuits. It is often used as an ingredient in many favourite foods such as fish fingers, sausages, gravies, sauces and soy sauce.
- Coeliac UK has a Helpline on 0333 332 2033 and further information can be found at [www.coeliac.org.uk](http://www.coeliac.org.uk)

\* Comparative costs for gluten-free bread and gluten containing bread as of 20 October 2016

Gluten-free loaf	Price per 100g	Price per loaf
Tesco-free from white sliced (400g)	£0.38	£1.50
Tesco-free from fresh bread (550g) (white or brown)	£0.36	£2.00
Asda free from white sliced bread (400g)	£0.38	£1.50
Sainsbury's free from sliced (400g) white or brown	£0.50	£2.00

Compared to gluten containing

Gluten containing loaf	Price per 100g	Price per loaf
Tesco everyday value bread (800g) (white or brown)	£0.05	£0.36
Tesco bread (800g) (white or bread)	£0.06	£0.50
Asda Baker's Selection (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.50
Asda chosen by you (800g) wholemeal	£0.09	£0.75
Sainsbury's basics bread (800g) white or brown	£0.05	£0.40
Sainsbury's bread (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.45
Waitrose essential (800g) white or brown	£0.06	£0.45
Waitrose bread (800g) sliced white bread	£0.13	£1.00

Note: for Morrison and Waitrose customers there is not an own brand gluten-free version. Genius bread (gluten-free) is available at £2.70 for a 535g loaf (£0.51 per 100g) or Warburtons gluten-free is available at £3.00 for a 560g loaf (£0.54 per 100g)