



**IMPROVING GLUTEN-FREE
AWARENESS & SAFETY
IN THE CATERING SECTOR**

*Event Report and Next Steps
European Parliament, Brussels
13 May 2026*

AOECS
Association of European Coeliac Societies



**Gluten Free
Alliance™**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 13 May 2026, the Association of European Coeliac Societies (AOECS), with the support of Member of the European Parliament Peter Agius, convened a roundtable discussion in the European Parliament on improving gluten-free awareness and safety in the catering sector.

The event brought together representatives of coeliac patient organisations, hospitality professionals, food industry stakeholders, and policy experts to **discuss the challenges faced by people living with coeliac disease when eating outside the home and to explore practical solutions** that could improve safety, confidence, and inclusion across Europe.

Discussions highlighted that **safe gluten-free dining is not merely a dietary preference** issue but a matter of health, accessibility, mobility, and social participation. Participants stressed the importance of staff training, clear procedures, communication, and cooperation between patient organisations, policymakers, and the hospitality sector.

The event also demonstrated that **many successful models already exist across Europe** and that greater sharing of knowledge and good practices could help accelerate progress throughout the European Union.

This report is designed as a launching point for embedding safe catering principles and good practices across Europe. Drawing on the discussions, it outlines actionable recommendations to move **from words to action in three key areas: consistency and awareness, inclusion and mobility.**



BARRIERS TO SAFE DINING IN EUROPE

Coeliac disease is a serious autoimmune condition affecting approximately 1% of the population. The only treatment is strict, lifelong adherence to a gluten-free diet.

While food information legislation has improved the availability of allergen information, many people living with coeliac disease continue to experience significant difficulties when eating outside the home.

Concerns regarding **cross-contamination, inconsistent staff knowledge, and varying levels of awareness** within the catering sector often limit confidence and participation in social, educational, professional, and travel-related activities.

Recognising these challenges, AOECS under the auspicious of MEP Peter Agius, organised this event to **create a constructive dialogue** between patient organisations, industry representatives, policymakers, and hospitality professionals.



EVENT OVERVIEW

The event was hosted by MEP Peter Agius and moderated by AOECS Secretary General Veronica Rubio, and sought to achieve the following objectives:

- Raise awareness of the daily challenges faced by people living with coeliac disease when eating outside the home.
- Highlight examples of good practice from the hospitality sector and patient organisations.
- Explore practical measures to improve gluten-free food safety and reliability in catering environments.
- Encourage collaboration between stakeholders at European and national level.
- Identify opportunities for future policy and awareness initiatives

Participants included:

- Representatives from national coeliac societies from Belgium, Italy, Slovenia and Spain;
- Members of the hospitality and catering sector;
- Representatives of the food industry and nutrition sector;
- European policy stakeholders;

Concretely, the event featured contributions from Specialised Nutrition Europe (SNE), providing a policy and regulatory perspective on food and nutrition frameworks relevant to gluten-free provision, and from nHow Brussels Bloom Hotel, sharing practical hospitality experience on the implementation of safe gluten-free catering in a real-world hotel setting.

The discussion was structured around three themes:

- The lived experience of people with coeliac disease;
- Operational challenges and opportunities within the catering sector;
- Policy and system-level perspectives.

KEY THEMES EMERGING FROM THE DISCUSSION

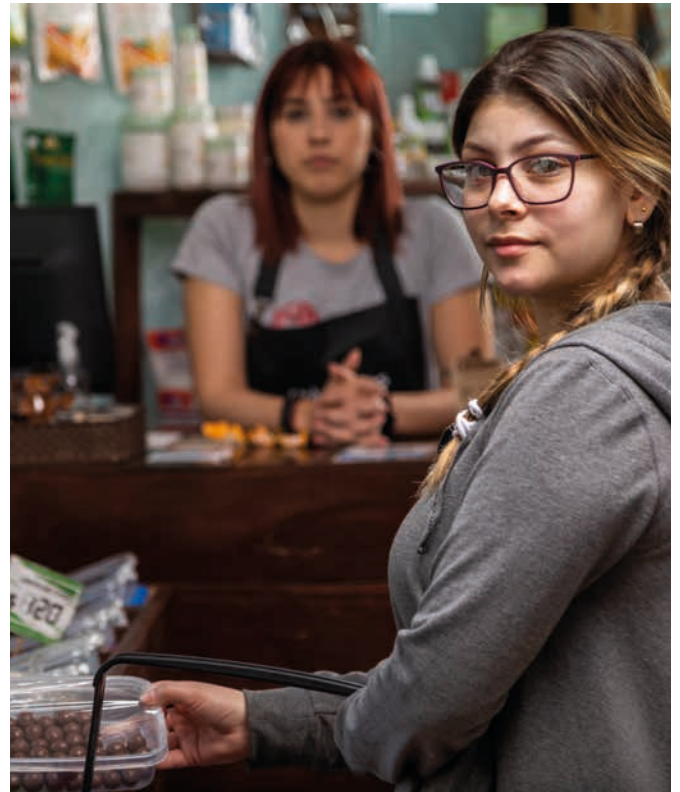
SAFE GLUTEN-FREE DINING IS A MATTER OF INCLUSION

Representatives from National Coeliac Societies highlighted that coeliac disease affects far more than food choices.

Participants described how uncertainty regarding gluten-free safety can influence:

- travel decisions;
- participation in social activities;
- educational opportunities (e.g. participation in Erasmus Programmes by young coeliac patients);
- professional mobility;
- and overall quality of life.

The discussion reinforced that safe access to gluten-free meals is closely linked to social inclusion and equal participation in society.



TRUST REMAINS A CENTRAL CHALLENGE

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was trust.

People with coeliac disease must rely on catering operators to understand the requirements of a strict gluten-free diet and to implement appropriate procedures to avoid cross-contamination.

Participants noted that uncertainty regarding staff knowledge or kitchen practices often leads individuals to avoid eating out altogether, despite available gluten-free menu options.

Building confidence therefore requires not only offering gluten-free meals, but ensuring that preparation and service processes are reliable and transparent.



TRAINING AND AWARENESS ARE KEY DRIVERS OF IMPROVEMENT

The hospitality sector perspective demonstrated that many of the challenges associated with gluten-free service can be addressed through practical measures.

Examples discussed included:

- staff training;
- clear communication procedures;
- kitchen protocols to minimise cross-contamination;
- management commitment;
- and ongoing awareness-building;
- personal accreditation for allergen and gluten-free food management and
- venue accreditation

Participants agreed that improvements often depend less on expensive investments and more on knowledge, consistency, and organisational culture.

GOOD PRACTICES ALREADY EXIST ACROSS EUROPE

Several examples presented during the discussion showed that successful approaches already exist within both patient organisations and the hospitality sector.

Participants highlighted the importance of:

- sharing practical experiences;
- exchanging training resources;
- learning from existing certification schemes;
- and promoting proven models that can be adapted across countries.

The discussion suggested that Europe does not need to start from zero but can build upon existing expertise and experience.

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER COOPERATION IS ESSENTIAL

The discussion underlined that responsibility for improving gluten-free safety and accessibility requires cooperation between:

- policymakers;
- hospitality operators;
- food manufacturers;
- patient organisations;
- healthcare professionals;
- and consumer protection actors.

Participants recognised the **important role of patient organisations** in providing expertise, sharing experience on educational programmes, practical guidance, and real-world insights.

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN VISION FOR SAFE AND INCLUSIVE GLUTEN-FREE EATING OUT: PRIORITIES EMERGING FROM THE DISCUSSION

The discussions held during this event reinforced the need for a more coordinated and ambitious approach to improving the daily lives of people living with coeliac disease across Europe.

Building on the insights shared by patient representatives, hospitality professionals, industry stakeholders and policymakers, AOECS will continue developing a set of **recommendations aimed at advancing awareness, safety, inclusion and mobility** for people requiring a strict gluten-free diet.

The resulting recommendations will serve as a practical advocacy framework and a **starting point for future discussions with European institutions, national authorities, industry stakeholders** and other partners.

Three key pillars emerged from the discussions.



PILLAR 1: CONSISTENCY AND AWARENESS

Ensuring safe gluten-free dining requires a consistent level of knowledge and implementation throughout the hospitality sector.

AOECS will explore recommendations relating to:

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

- Development of a European framework for gluten-free and cross-contamination training within the hospitality sector.
- Integration of gluten-free food safety principles into culinary, hospitality and tourism education programmes.
- Promotion of continuous professional development opportunities for hospitality professionals.

PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION AND CERTIFICATION

- Exploration of certification models focused on trained professionals rather than solely on certified establishments.
- Assessment of best practices from sectors such as cruise tourism and international hospitality.

HARMONISED ALLERGEN INFORMATION

- Consistent implementation and enforcement of existing EU allergen legislation.
- Improved visibility and reliability of allergen information in catering environments.
- Greater clarity for consumers when making informed food choices.

COMMITMENT TO FOOD SAFETY

- Encouraging greater confidence and transparency regarding gluten-free food preparation.
- Promoting practical measures to minimise cross-contamination risks throughout the food service chain.

PILLAR 2: INCLUSION

Safe access to gluten-free food is a prerequisite for full participation in society.

Future recommendations may include actions to:

IMPROVE ACCESS IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

- Promote the availability of safe gluten-free meals in schools, universities, hospitals, care facilities and other public institutions.
- Encourage public procurement practices that consider the needs of people living with coeliac disease.

SUPPORT STUDENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

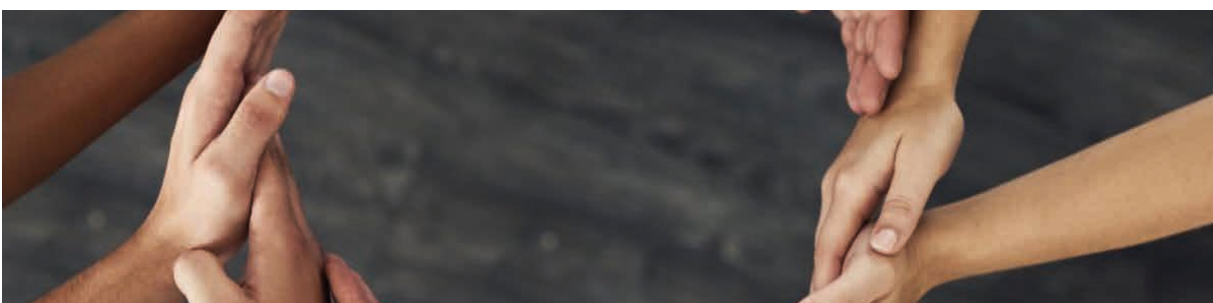
- Improve support mechanisms for students participating in mobility programmes such as Erasmus+.
- Facilitate access to safe gluten-free food during educational exchanges and international study programmes.

PROMOTE EARLIER DIAGNOSIS AND AWARENESS

- Encourage greater awareness of coeliac disease among healthcare professionals.
- Explore opportunities to improve access to timely and less invasive diagnosis pathways.

STRENGTHEN THE ROLE OF NUTRITION IN HEALTHCARE

- Support greater recognition of nutrition as an essential component of healthcare and disease management.
- Encourage stronger collaboration between healthcare professionals, dietitians and patient organisations.



PILLAR 3: MOBILITY

Future recommendations may explore:

A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE ON NUTRITION AND MOBILITY

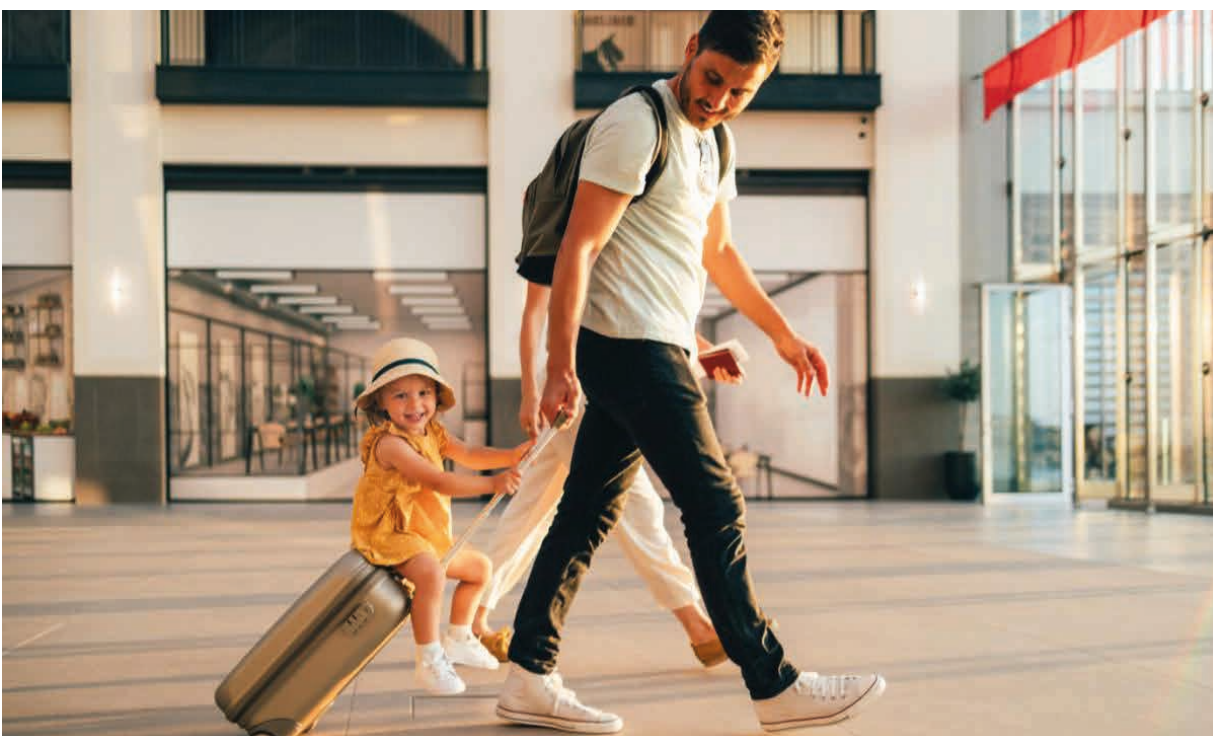
- Greater recognition of the relationship between food accessibility and freedom of movement within the European Union.
- Consideration of the needs of people requiring medically necessary diets within mobility-related policies and initiatives.

SHARING BEST PRACTICES ACROSS EUROPE

- Identifying successful models from countries with advanced gluten-free support systems
- Facilitating the transfer and adaptation of proven approaches across Member States.

ACCESS TO SAFE GLUTEN-FREE FOOD WHILE TRAVELLING

- Improving availability of safe gluten-free options in transport hubs, including airports, railway stations and ports.
- Encouraging greater consideration of gluten-free needs within travel and tourism services.





LOOKING AHEAD

AOECS will continue working with its member societies and stakeholders to further refine these recommendations and identify practical, achievable actions that can contribute to a safer, more inclusive and more accessible Europe for people living with coeliac disease.

The diversity of perspectives represented during the event demonstrated the value of constructive dialogue and collaboration between patient organisations, policymakers, industry representatives, healthcare professionals and hospitality operators in advancing gluten-free awareness, safety and inclusion across Europe.

The recommendations will serve as a foundation for future advocacy activities and stakeholder engagement, helping to ensure that the needs of people requiring a strict gluten-free diet are better recognised across policy, healthcare, hospitality and mobility discussions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

AOECS would like to express its sincere gratitude to **MEP Peter Agius** for hosting this discussion at the European Parliament and for his commitment to raising awareness of the challenges faced by people living with coeliac disease across Europe.

Special thanks are extended to the **speakers from Coeliac Societies, Lieven Loose, Vlaamse Coeliakie Vereniging (VCV), Susanna Neuhold, Associazione Italiana Celiachia, Natasa Forstner Holesek, Slovensko društvo za celiakijo – SDC, and Joel Huguet Garcia, Celiacs de Catalunya (SMAP)** for bringing the lived realities of people with coeliac disease to the forefront of the conversation.

AOECS would also like to acknowledge the valuable contributions of **Beat Späth, Secretary General at Specialised Nutrition Europe (SNE)**, whose participation helped provide important insights into the regulatory, nutrition and food policy dimensions of gluten-free food provision, and **Jose Alberto Carbajal Rodriguez, Food & Beverage at Manager at nHow Brussels Bloom Hotel** for sharing practical experience and demonstrating how awareness, training and operational commitment can contribute to delivering safe and inclusive gluten-free dining experiences within the hospitality sector.

Finally, we thank all the hospitality and catering professionals, industry representatives, healthcare and nutrition experts, and policymakers who generously shared their expertise, experiences, and perspectives throughout the discussion. AOECS looks forward to continuing this important conversation with its members, European institutions, industry partners and other stakeholders in the years ahead.



CONTACT

If you have any questions about this brochure or our advocacy work, please contact us at:

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