

P-05-865 Guarantee fully plant-based options on every public sector menu to protect the rights of vegans and for our health, the environment and animals, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 15.01.20

We thank the Minister for Education and the Minister for Finance & Trefnydd for their responses to the letter provided by the Committee.

In noting the content from both letters, it appears that the Ministers fail to acknowledge that whilst regulatory guidance notes foods which are suitable for vegans, it does not actually promote the uptake of these products. This therefore leaves many vegans finding themselves without suitable catering and therefore facing indirect discrimination. The aim of our petition seeks to counter this by mandating at least one vegan option on all public sector menus for the following reasons:

1) Vegan rights

Following a landmark employment tribunal case in January 2020, veganism has been ruled as having satisfied the legal tests for it to be recognised as a non-religious philosophical belief and is therefore protected under the 2010 Equality Act. As a result, it is now imperative that the public sector take appropriate action on this issue, as there is a legal obligation upon public sector authorities to ensure that vegans are not – directly or indirectly – discriminated against.

Whilst the National Procurement Service Food and Drinks framework agreements note that there are plant-based products available for public sector procurement, there is little else that is done to ensure the provision of vegan options on public sector menus, and therefore, purchase of these products are often low. As a result, vegans often find that they cannot be provided for and are reliant on arranging their own food. This not only promotes division, but also suggests that vegan rights are not given the same due diligence as other beliefs – mandating a vegan option on all standard menus would help to prevent this.

Similarly, whilst we appreciate that the *Healthy Eating in Maintained Schools* guidance allows for plant-based products to be provided within schools, there is nothing within the guidance which reinforces the need to have vegan options available to pupils, and therefore, procurement of foods with animal products generally get favoured over vegan-friendly options. This often leads to indirect discrimination as vegan children can be left with very basic options which do not constitute a nutritious meal - such as dry toast or a piece of fruit - and miss out on key nutrients within their meals. Our petition seeks to counter this by ensuring that at least one vegan option is mandated on all menus, which by default will be suitable for children of all backgrounds and beliefs.

2) Nutrition

The Minister for Education states within her letter that the nutritional recommendations made within the Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutritional Standards and Requirements) Regulations 2013 were introduced six years ago and are therefore in need of review.

It should therefore be noted that well balanced vegan meals are typically high in fruits and vegetables and would therefore meet the nutritional standards laid out in the *Healthy Eating* guidelines. Research has linked plant-based diets with lower blood pressure and cholesterol, as well as lower rates of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer. Mandating a vegan option on all public sector menus would help build familiarity with plant-based food and help address some of the many diet-related public health crises affecting the UK and putting strain on the NHS.

In the same way that all other diets require careful planning to ensure they are nutritionally complete, vegan diets are no different. The Vegan Society employs a registered dietitian and works closely with the British Dietetic Association (BDA), and is happy to support any discussions relating to the review of the regulatory guidance.

3) Government intervention on climate issues

The Committee on Climate Change have suggested the 'public sector take a strong lead by providing plant-based options in schools and hospitals', with Chatham House research stating that the public want government intervention on climate change issues. Mandating a vegan option on all public sector menus would encourage a transition towards more sustainable diets in the wider population and would show that the Welsh Government take the public demand for government intervention seriously.

The UK vegan population continues to soar, having doubled twice in the last five years, as people become more aware of the benefits of a plant-based diet, and yet an ever increasing number of people find themselves unable to be suitably catered for within the public sector.

Wales has the opportunity to lead the way in the UK, in terms of protecting the rights of its ever-growing vegan population, whilst taking meaningful action to address climate change and diet-related public health crises. We believe that these issues are of the utmost importance and so the public sector should be leading by example and taking appropriate action now.