

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 Chair, 25.02.19

Background

There are over 600,000 vegans in the UK and the number has doubled twice in the past 4 years.¹ The availability of vegan options in supermarkets and restaurants has increased recently as consumer demand grows. However, many people struggle to find vegan options in public sector settings, which provide food for some of our most vulnerable citizens. This means that many people, including children, are missing out on free meals and are being denied access to suitable food when they're dependent on the state to provide for them.

In 2017 Portugal introduced a law compelling all public sector institutions to provide a vegan meal on their standard menus, becoming the first country in the world to do so.² Steps are being taken in other countries to increase the availability of plant-based options. For example, in Brazil a number of districts are working towards making their school meals fully plant-based in recognition of the environmental, health and financial benefits of doing so.³ Steps are also being taken in places such as New York and Los Angeles.⁴

Problems faced by vegans in public sector catering

A survey on vegan provision in the public sector, confirmed that many schools, hospitals and other state bodies are failing to provide for vegans.⁵ School children often miss out on meals and hospital patients reported having to rely on family to bring them food and discharging themselves early to go home and eat.

Many hospitals do not provide for vegans with any consistency, leaving vegan patients having to rely on family or friends, or having to discharge themselves before they are well enough because they are not being provided with food. Not everyone will have friends or family who can bring them food, and many wards do not allow food to be brought in.

Wales' schools do not generally have any meals that are suitable for vegans, often vegetarian options contain dairy, eggs or both.

¹ Ipsos Mori survey commissioned by The Vegan Society 2018

² <https://metro.co.uk/2017/03/10/it-is-now-illegal-not-to-offer-vegan-food-at-prisons-hospitals-and-schools-in-portugal-6501872/>

³ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/brazil-plant-based-vegan-cafeterias/>

⁴ <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/news/nyc-public-schools-adding-vegan-lunch-option/>

⁵ https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/d95b36_f4bccc9845854533ba8aea3cf8e590b2.pdf Go Vegan Scotland survey on state vegan provision

We have heard multiple examples but one of the most startling came from an elderly woman in West Wales, who told us that she had to survive on crisps for 4 days whilst recovering from an operation in hospital before discharging herself early against medical advice so she could go home and get something nutritious to eat.

The situation in hospitals is so bad that groups of committed volunteers are having to resort to bringing food in to hospitals to feed vegan patients all over the UK – including in Wales.⁶

We are aware from speaking to vegan parents of a number of instances of Welsh schools refusing to provide food suitable for vegans even when pressed to do so for individual vegan pupils, by their parents.

We are aware from discussions with local authority staff that some local authority food providers are under the impression not only that they do not have to provide vegan meals, but they *cannot* do so unless an individual request is sanctioned by the NHS. The NHS acknowledges that vegan diets can provide us with everything we need and so this is not accurate.

There is clearly a lot of misinformation and confusion, which is resulting in vegan children being refused suitable food, including where they're entitled to free school meals in primary schools.

Existing Protections

Vegans hold a fundamental moral conviction, that it's wrong to use and kill animals and as such have protections under human rights and equality law in the UK. Fundamentally held beliefs or convictions that are serious, cogent and worthy of respect, have the same protection as religious beliefs, and veganism has been recognised as such by the European Court of Human Rights⁷ and this has been acknowledged by the UK and Welsh Governments.

Vegans have a right to live in accordance with their fundamental conviction, avoiding animal products, and the state or government has an obligation to secure this right. A balance is to be struck between the rights of vegans and the rights of the community as a whole, so if the state is making general provision and refuses to make provision that is suitable for vegans it will need to show that it would be unduly burdensome to do so.

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/141595326426123/> Vegan Hospital Food Network

⁷ <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-1503%22%5D%7D>

To live in a way that avoids participating in animal use and killing, vegans need access to alternatives. In general, that is not an issue in Wales, but when vegans are dependent on the state for provision, for example in hospital or in school, there is often a complete lack of provision. It would not be unduly burdensome to provide vegan food as standard, in the same way that currently vegetarian options are provided every day.

Necessity for change

The Welsh Government has a legal obligation to secure to vegans their rights under Human Rights and Equality law. They cannot simply leave it to local authorities where they know that the local authorities are failing in their duties. It is their responsibility to ensure that necessary measures are taken to secure to vegans their rights. The best way to achieve consistent provision is for legislation to be passed requiring that all state entities provide at least one vegan option to service users. By always having a vegan option, in the same way that currently public entities always have a vegetarian option, and by making it available to all, we would ensure that vegans were always provided for while avoiding waste and encouraging plant-based eating. Offering more vegan food on public sector menus, doesn't just protect the rights of vegans, it also offers wider benefits to public health and the environment from more people choosing plant-based foods.

Inclusive

Offering more vegan food is an inclusive choice as it can be eaten by people from all walks of life, for example, people looking to reduce their animal product consumption for health or environmental concerns, vegetarians and people with religious dietary requirements, like halal and kosher. Vegan food can be a common denominator that everyone can enjoy.

Due to vegan food covering so many of the requirements different people have and the ingredients often being less expensive than animal products, institutions can also benefit from cost savings by offering more vegan food on their menus.

Sustainable

We note the response from Lesley Griffiths AC/AM (Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs) dated 29 January 2019. We were disappointed that the Environment Minister did not address the environmental arguments stated in the petition:

"Plant-based diets are better for the environment and can reduce our food related carbon emissions by up to 50%.⁸ The UN has urged a global move towards a meat and dairy free diet for the benefit of our planet, and Wales has the opportunity to lead the way."

In addition to this, animal agriculture is responsible for up to 91% of Amazon destruction (forests are destroyed to grow feed for animals)⁹ and for more greenhouse gas emissions than all direct emissions from the transport sector.¹⁰

In June, researchers at Oxford University concluded that adopting a vegan diet is the *single biggest* way to reduce your impact on planet Earth.¹¹ This is far bigger than cutting down on flights or even buying an electric car. The United Nations' IPCC report warned us that we have just 12 years to avert catastrophic temperature increases by limiting global warming to 1.5 C.¹² This is something that can only be achieved if there are deep reductions in methane emissions, which would require global and UK diets to move away from animal agriculture towards being more plant-based.

Wales has set itself ambitious greenhouse gas emissions targets, seeking to reduce overall emissions to 80% of 1990 levels and agriculture represents 12.6% of all Welsh emissions.¹³

According to data obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, there were approximately 10.4 million meals served in Welsh hospitals in 2018. If just 10% of these meals were vegan, Welsh hospitals could cut their food related greenhouse gas emissions by 944 tonnes of CO2 equivalents per year, this is the equivalent of driving to the moon and back 4 and a half times or from Land's End to John O'Groats 2,640 times!¹⁴

If Wales is to meet its climate change targets, it is essential that diets and agriculture are addressed as part of the solution and this could be a huge step towards that.

Public Health

⁸ https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-06/Eating%20for%20%20degrees_Full_Report.pdf

⁹ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/15060>

¹⁰ <http://www.fao.org/3/i3437e/i3437e00.htm>

¹¹ 'Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers' J.Poore & T.Nemecek, 2018

¹² https://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf

¹³ NEI/Greenhouse Gas Inventory

¹⁴ Data on greenhouse gas emissions of average meat-eaters diets and vegan diets taken from "Dietary greenhouse gas emissions of meat-eaters, fish-eaters, vegetarians and vegans in the UK, (Scarborough et al, 2014).

The British Dietetic Association recognises that well-planned totally plant-based diets are suitable for every age and life stage¹⁵ and the NHS have confirmed that you can get everything you need to be healthy from a well-planned vegan diet.¹⁶

There are benefits to making vegan meals available to everyone. Typically higher in fruits and vegetables, vegan diets tend to contain more fibre and less saturated fat than omnivorous diets, aligning themselves closely with NHS nutrient recommendations.

In addition, some research has linked vegan diets with lower blood pressure and cholesterol, as well as lower rates of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer.

Public health is being negatively affected by the consumption of animal products. Diet-related ill health costs the NHS a whopping £5.8 billion annually¹⁷ – this is more than smoking, alcohol, or physical inactivity. The UK is currently woefully short of meeting the recommended 5 portions of fruit and veg a day¹⁸, so putting fresh, plant-based foods on menus will build familiarity with all the amazing things that can be done with plant-based foods. This will hopefully lead to healthier (and more sustainable) longer-term dietary choices.

Conclusion

Our proposal aligns with several Government objectives highlighted in relation to the ground-breaking Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, including encouraging a sustainable and globally responsible Wales, tackling health inequalities, long-term disease prevention, and promoting inclusivity.

Wales has the opportunity to lead the way in the UK, in terms of protecting its ever-growing vegan population and 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.

¹⁵ <https://www.bda.uk.com/news/view?id=179>

¹⁶ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-vegan-diet/>

¹⁷ <https://jech.bmj.com/content/jech/59/12/1054.full.pdf>

¹⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772434/NDNS_UK_Y1-9_report.pdf