

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 – Petitioner to Committee, 09.10.19

Petition Ref: P-05-865

We note the content of the submissions provided by the Local Authority and Health Boards in Wales, which outline the existing provisions of vegan food within the public sector.

We would like to specifically address the submissions from the many councils which state that they already provide a vegetarian option as standard. By making the simple amendments required to change this to a vegan option, more pupils with special requirements will be catered for and food provisions will become more inclusive. This would also address the issue of demand and would eliminate the need to create alternate options for those areas concerned about low uptake of vegan dishes.

We are pleased to see the responses by the Minister of Health and Social Services and the Minister for Finance and Trefnydd, who have stated that they are considering improving their vegan offerings. By mandating this and simultaneously offering advice and support - which The Vegan Society are willing to collaborate on - such improvements will become easier to implement and therefore, more consistent across Wales.

We still believe there is crucial progress to be made however, most of the submissions indicate that vegan food is predominantly only provided via special request, whilst the aim of our petition is to achieve consistent and guaranteed provision for the following purposes:

Vegan Rights

Our petition asks for a plant-based option to be made mandatory on every standard public sector menu. In practice, this would mean that there would be a plant-based option readily available in every school, hospital, prison, council, care home and any other state or local authority-run institution menu in Wales, every day. This would be available to everyone, without the need to make a special request. This differs from the current situation that's been outlined in several of the submission responses, where vegans, in theory, can only be catered for by special request.

Not only does this promote division, but it also indicates an issue with the rights of vegans – despite the claims made in the submissions that vegans can be catered for by many schools, in practice, this is often not the case. Where a vegan menu is provided, staff often have little awareness of it or are ill prepared to make provisions. Vegans are therefore often told they cannot be provided for or are offered very limited options to compensate, such as plain toast, a single piece of fruit or a packet of crisps. These are not nutritious meals and do not meet the standards in the *'Healthy Eating in Schools'* regulations.

Many hospitals do not provide for vegans with any consistency, leaving vegan patients to rely on family and 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. Offering a plant-based meal as standard on all public sector menus ensures that the growing number of vegans are catered for and are not discriminated against.

Public Procurement

Fully plant-based options ought to be available every day for all pupils, avoiding the need for special requests and reducing the likelihood of mistakes and misunderstandings. If implemented well, ensuring tasty, nutritious options, the availability of plant-based options for all pupils could have many benefits including improving carbon footprint, reducing cost and improving uptake of healthy options.

When local authorities push back against requests for vegan provision, one of the things most frequently referenced is limitations imposed on them by the procurement system and the fact that much of the food comes from outside suppliers with a limited list of options. Clearly, we should not be led by our existing procurement system, but rather the system should be reformed as necessary to ensure that public sector bodies in Wales are providing good quality, nutritious meals, ideally using locally sourced produce. This would be in line with the Welsh Government's commitment to sustainability and climate change.

Climate Emergency

In specifically noting the content of the submissions from Cardiff Council and Newport Council, it is evident that public sector organisations are already aware of the role of plant-based diets in addressing sustainability and environmental initiatives:

- Plant-based diets are better for the environment and can reduce an individual's food-related carbon emissions by up to 50%.
- Researchers at Oxford University have concluded that eating a plant-based diet could be the single biggest way to reduce an individual's environmental impact on the planet.

Following the declaration of a Climate Emergency in Wales, it is imperative that government promote environmentally sustainable consumption behaviours. Making vegan food mandatory on every menu would not only encourage this, but would also address the concerns about demand noted in the submission by Powys County Council. Greater accessibility would see a rise in consumption, simply due to the fact that vegan options are suitable for people from a multitude of backgrounds.

In order to tackle the climate crisis effectively, we must take heed of the large body of scientific evidence that highlights the need for promoting plant-based options, such as the most recent Committee on Climate Change report¹, which has explicitly stated that the public sector should lead the way by serving plant-based food.

Wales has the opportunity to not only take meaningful action to address climate change, but also protect the rights of an ever-growing number of vegans. These issues are of paramount importance, and it is imperative to take appropriate action now.

¹ <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/net-zero-technical-report/>