

Response ID ANON-W52Q-QBSW-C

Submitted to Census 2031 topic consultation
Submitted on 2026-02-04 15:28:24

Introduction

About you

Are you answering on behalf of an organisation or as an individual?

On behalf of an organisation

About you

What is the name of your organisation?

What is the name of your organisation?:
The Vegan Society

About you

What is your name? Please include your first and last name.

What is your name? Please include your first and last name:
Claire Ogley

What is your email address?

What is your email address?:
policy@vegansociety.com

What sector do you work in? Please select all that apply.

Charity or community sector

Other, please specify::

Please can the ONS contact you to discuss your requirements for population statistics?

Yes

To support transparency in our decision-making, responses to this topic consultation will be made public. This will include the name of the responding organisation. We will not publish your name or email address with your response. Please be aware that any information provided in response to this topic consultation could be made publicly available if requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

Information on census topics

Basic demographics and household composition

Does your organisation expect to use basic demographics and household composition Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Housing

Does your organisation expect to use housing Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Migration and citizenship

Does your organisation expect to use migration and citizenship Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Ethnicity and national identity

Does your organisation expect to use ethnicity and national identity Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Religion

Does your organisation expect to use religion Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Language

Does your organisation expect to use language Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Sexual orientation

Does your organisation expect to use sexual orientation Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Gender identity

Does your organisation expect to use gender identity Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Health, disability and unpaid care

Does your organisation expect to use health, disability and unpaid care Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Education

Does your organisation expect to use education Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Labour market

Does your organisation expect to use labour market Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Travel to work

Does your organisation expect to use travel to work Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

UK armed forces veterans

Does your organisation expect to use UK armed forces veterans Census 2031 data? Selecting No will move the survey on to the next topic group.

No

Requirements for topic data not collected before

Type of health condition, impairment or disability

How, if at all, do alternative (non-census) sources of data on type of health condition, impairment or disability meet your organisation's requirements? Please include detailed examples in your answer.

How, if at all, do alternative (non-census) sources of data on type of health condition, impairment or disability meet your organisation's requirements? Please include detailed examples in your answer.:

Would your organisation expect to use type of health condition, impairment or disability 2031 Census data if they were available?

No

Income

How, if at all, do alternative (non-census) sources of data on income meet your organisation's requirements? Please include detailed examples in your answer.

How, if at all, do alternative (non-census) sources of data on income meet your organisation's requirements? Please include detailed examples in your answer.:

Would your organisation expect to use income 2031 Census data if they were available?

No

Additional new topics

What, if any, other additional new topics would your organisation propose for Census 2031? Please specify each topic.

Topic 1::

Philosophical belief – veganism

Topic 1: How would your organisation expect to use these census data? Please include detailed examples in your answer. :

The Vegan Society calls for the topic of philosophical belief to be included in the 2031 Census alongside and with equal weight to the topic of religious belief. One of the explicit options under philosophical belief needs to be veganism. This is because the protections under the Equality Act 2010, including the Public Sector Equality Duty, have equal weight for philosophical beliefs including veganism, as apply to religious beliefs which meet the Grainger criteria.

Veganism is, by definition, an ethical belief system: "a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of avoiding all products derived wholly or partly from animals." As with religious belief, vegans seek to live in accordance with their philosophical belief. The term, 'vegan' applies to people who accept, hold, and seek to practice, the protected philosophical belief of veganism.

Veganism was documented in the UK the late 1830s as 'Vegetarianism', in France as 'Légumism' in the 1850s, and in the UK as 'Frutarianism' the 1890s, deriving from ancient religious and philosophical beliefs such as Ahimsa and Pythagoreanism.

The Vegan Society was founded in 1944 with 20 members, defined the term 'vegan' with the most referenced definition for the modern movement and has helped vegans to secure their human rights and equality protections ever since.

In 2010, Vegan Society research suggested c. 250,000 vegans in the UK, and by 2024, more than c. 1% of the UK population or c. 700,000 people were vegan (The Vegan Society 2025). (This exceeds one religion listed on the 2021 Census voluntary question (ONS 2022)). The European population of vegans may be as high as 3% (Meticulous Research 2022).

The Equality Act 2010 makes explicit that philosophical beliefs must be given equal weight to religious beliefs, subject to the Grainger Criteria (Grainger plc v Nicholson 2009). Legal recognition of veganism was established in 1993 under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (CW vs. UK 1991). The Vegan Society supported with bringing the case (Postle 2020), including through providing legal advice, where veganism was explicitly confirmed as a protected philosophical belief and confirmed that it was entitled to the same protections as religious beliefs. Drawing on the importance of The Vegan Society's definition of veganism, and our concern for the suffering of animals, Judge Postle confirmed that vegans can be said to be 'moralistically orientated' embodying "a genuine philosophical concern for all sentient life".

The Vegan Society now runs a 'Know Your Rights' service. We support vegans, their families, public authorities, and other service providers and employers to ensure due regard is paid to the needs and beliefs of vegans. We typically deal with c. 250 cases each year (The Vegan Society 2025). These are predominantly vegan individuals and households who are facing adverse treatment, and in some cases, potentially unlawful direct and indirect discrimination in schools and hospitals, and other circumstances.

Under the Equality Act 2010, the statutory Public Sector Equality Duty requires public authorities, and other organisations carrying out public functions, to have due regard to the equality of vegans. This Duty applies when exercising their public functions, and in decision-making. They must consider how their policies, programmes, services, guidance and practices affect vegans. The general Equality duty requires them to have due regard to the need to (1) eliminate conduct prohibited by the Equality Act; (2) to advance equality of opportunity; and (3) to foster good relations between vegans and non-vegans, whilst fulfilling their public functions.

The Vegan Society specifically notes that the dietary needs of vegans are relevant to the human right to adequate food (EHRC 1950). The dietary needs of vegan children are relevant to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Unfortunately, it remains common in the UK for vegan adults and children to rely up on family members to ensure they have suitable, adequate food in schools, hospitals and other public institutions and service settings. Vegans also face challenges in health and medical care, particularly in access to suitable prescription medications.

From our work, we know that vegans are experiencing distressing misunderstandings, failure to meet their needs, and discrimination in vulnerable situations. Here are just three examples of discrimination experienced by vegans in recent years:

1) A vegan training in England to become a Registered Dietitian had to attend a catering lecture, but students were not consulted about their protected beliefs. Over 50 students were each given a whole dead chicken including head and internal organs. The vegan student asked the lecturer for a suitable alternative learning exercise. The lecturer refused, and did not appear to understand the Equality Act 2010 provisions. The student had to stay until the first session break, and was highly distressed.

The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to most primary, secondary and further education settings in Wales, Scotland and England. Educators must give due regard to the needs of vegans.

2) A school gave a young vegan learner the same meal every day: a jacket potato with baked beans. Despite accurate information from the learner, their family, and The Vegan Society, the school did not offer varied, balanced vegan meals. The Vegan Society had to advise the school regarding their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty. The school put unreasonable burdens on the learner by not proactively implementing The Equality Act (2010).

Every public sector catering service should ensure that varied, nutritionally balanced, vegan-suitable meals are always available.

3) A health visitor wrongly told a pregnant vegan person that their health, and the health of their baby, were at risk from their vegan diet. The health visitor gave incorrect, misleading nutrition advice, and distressing, incorrect potential health outcomes. They advised outside of their own professional training remit, and should have consulted a Registered Dietitian. The Vegan Society Registered Dietitian who later advised was shocked at this unprofessional prejudice.

Healthcare training and continuing professional development organisations must ensure that targeted measures are in place to minimize the risk of such unacceptable circumstances for vegans accessing health and care services.

Although some key public authority staff provide vegan-suitable care, many front-line staff are insufficiently trained to do so.

All of these examples illustrate that public authorities often do not fully understand their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty. Their knowledge about veganism and its status as a protected philosophical belief is incomplete. Partially this is due to a lack of information. But this is also due to the fact that, despite having the legal status, philosophical beliefs are not in practice being treated by the Government as equivalent to religious beliefs and as deserving of equivalent respect. Bringing philosophical belief into parity with religious belief in the 2031 Census, as set out in the Equality Act 2010 and subsequent legal precedent, will be a significant step in rectifying these failings.

Existing data sources do not fulfil the needs for philosophical belief data. There is no harmonised standard. Questions about religious beliefs are failing to capture legally equivalent philosophical beliefs. Administrative data sources such as general practitioner registrations, local education authority data systems, tax data etc. contain no relevant information. Surveys of nutrition and dietary intake do not reliably track veganism. Therefore, there is a demonstrable gap in knowledge, which the Census, uniquely, will fill with a clear, usable national framework.

The statistical power of the Census is needed. The voluntary religious belief question in 2021 was answered by 94.0% (56.0 million) of 'usual residents'. A voluntary philosophical belief question with equitable prominence will likely receive a similar high response rate. The 2031 Census can show every public authority and service provider that veganism is now as common, and as legitimate as well-known religious beliefs.

Implementing this parity in the Census would also align with the Office of National Statistics goal of capturing the changing nature of society. The Vegan Society's own monitoring of the past 20 years suggests that, as veganism becomes more prominent, the numbers of vegans is rising significantly.

Data on veganism from the 2031 Census data will for the first time establish an authoritative national baseline as to how many people are vegan. Organisations need this Census baseline to ensure their policies are in line with The Equality Act 2010 as it applies to vegans. For example, we know that vegan staff networks, for example those within public sector bodies or businesses, such as the Civil Service Vegan Network often face uncertainty about how many members they represent, because the Census framework for equalities currently excludes veganism.

Therefore, these data will make it easier to evaluate whether the Public Sector Equality Duty, and wider Equality Act 2010, are being consistently upheld for vegans. Public authorities, and equality oversight organisations, can compare Census data with monitoring data for regions and services. This will help reveal where best practice is being developed, and where vegans are experiencing discrimination at higher rates than average.

Each organisation can then prepare through training and resource allocation to implement best practice, to meet the proven needs of vegans. This is needed at regional level e.g. by Local Education Authorities, HM Prison and Probation Service regions, and NHS Trusts level, and also e.g. through Chambers of Commerce. The 2031 Census data will show where the numbers of vegans are highest.

Marisa Heath, Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning at Surrey County Council has told The Vegan Society,

"A local authority has some very practical reasons to collect data on the number of residents who identify as vegan, as part of its wider equality, public health, and service-planning responsibilities. Dietary preference can intersect with protected characteristics such as religion, disability, and age, and is

also relevant to public health, environmental policy, and social inclusion objectives.

“Understanding the scale and geographic distribution of vegan residents can help councils plan and commission services more effectively, including public catering, public health initiatives and their net zero goals. By collecting and sharing robust, privacy-compliant data, councils can move from anecdotal understanding to evidence-based decision-making, improving efficiency, inclusivity, and outcomes for residents while supporting wider health and environmental goals.”

This will also help meet their climate duties and goals, as vegan-suitable plant-based catering has consistently the lowest greenhouse gas emissions (Scarborough et al 2023).

By 2031, the proportion of vegans is likely to significantly exceed 1%. Therefore, a secondary school with one thousand learners and 100 staff, will have an average of more than 10 vegan learners and 1 vegan staff member. The largest hospitals such as the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham (QEHB) have over 1000 in-patients, treat over two million patients per year, with c. 24,000 staff plus hospital visitors (CQC 2025). QEHB will have an average of more than 10 vegan in-patients and 240 vegan staff at any one time, and 20,000 vegan outpatients per year by 2031.

Food, medications and other services suitable for vegans, are also suitable for other vegetarians, and people who for religious and/or health reasons avoid things taken from animals. The 2021 Census found c. 10% of people in England and Wales (ONS 2022) have a religious belief which affects their use of animals for food, medications (Tatham & Patel 2014) and other purposes.

Currently, there is too much delayed reactive provision from public authorities and other organisations, due to a lack of updated training and internal guidance. Vegans, and others, are having their rights denied, or only respected after unacceptable barriers.

Proactive provision based on reliable evidence from national and local data will mean that young learners have appetising, varied, nutritionally balanced vegan-suitable meals on their school menus. People using health services, who by definition are already struggling with health issues, will be able to access vegan-suitable catering by default. They will also be talking to knowledgeable health care professionals who can pro-actively offer them such vegan-suitable medications as are available for their needs.

Proactive provision will reduce the potential stress, marginalization, stigma and undernourishment to vegans in vulnerable situations that delays in reactive provision often cause.

Regarding the specific questions of this Census 2031 Topic Consultation, the statistical power of the Census is also needed to (1) understand small population groups within veganism, and culturally appropriate equality of provision for vegans; (2) to map need at geographies smaller than local authority level; and (3) to better understand the scale of dietetic challenges in catering for people with specific health conditions and Disabilities, who are vegan.

The Vegan Society believe that the Office of National Statistics, and the UK Parliament erred by not requiring philosophical belief to be presented equally alongside religious belief under a comprehensive Beliefs question in 2021.

Thus, The Vegan Society believe the 2031 Census of England and Wales should include a voluntary question about philosophical belief which gives veganism as an explicit option, alongside the equivalent religious belief question. This will put philosophical beliefs (for example, veganism) on a legally appropriate, equal footing with religious beliefs.

By providing accurate, authoritative data on the numbers and distribution of vegans, the 2031 Census will fulfill the Public Sector Equality Duty and general duties under The Equality Act 2010. Public authorities and other organisations will have clear information about the average numbers of vegans in their user groups. This will enable them to proactively implement vegan-suitable service provision with confidence. The rights of vegans will be more consistently protected. The 2031 Census will support service design and resource allocation that complies with the Public Sector Equality Duty and wider Equality Act 2010 in e.g. the NHS, in health care and catering; Schools, in catering and teaching; Wider local government: in care homes, community facilities and prisons; Emergency planning: catering in crises such as COVID-19 lockdown.

These data will also provide evidence base for academic research, NGOs and policy evaluation. Relevant research areas include: Changing belief structures in the UK, and the relationships between philosophical belief, religious belief and lack of religious belief; Impacts of philosophical and religious belief and lack of belief on consumption, health, environmental behaviours, and civic engagement; The geographies of philosophical and religious belief-based communities, and how these relate to social cohesion.

These data will also help fulfil the General Equality Duty, to improve relationships between those with and without a protected characteristic e.g. vegans and non-vegans. Pro-active vegan-suitable provision can also help meet the needs of other groups for services which are free of animal products for religious, philosophical, environmental, health and/or other reasons.

In summary, philosophical belief, and veganism, are legally equivalent to religious belief. This must be reflected in the 2031 Census through the questions that are asked of respondents. The Vegan Society would consider that a judicial review may be necessary if the 2031 Census does not give equal consideration to protected philosophical belief as it does to protected religious belief. This should be done through including a voluntary question on philosophical belief, with the explicit option of veganism, adjacent to and with equal prominence to, the religious belief voluntary question.

(References are in the 'Anything Else' section at the end of this Consultation).

Topic 2::

Topic 2: How would your organisation expect to use these census data? Please include detailed examples in your answer. :

Topic 3::

Topic 3: How would your organisation expect to use these census data? Please include detailed examples in your answer. :

Topic 4::

Topic 4: How would your organisation expect to use these census data? Please include detailed examples in your answer. :

Topic 5::

Topic 5: How would your organisation expect to use these census data? Please include detailed examples in your answer. :

Geographies

The ONS produces a number of core statistical and administrative geographies.

What additional geographies, if any, does your organisation require for Census 2031?

What additional geographies, if any, does your organisation require for Census 2031?:

Census definitions and population bases

Census definitions, such as usual resident and dwelling, describe how individuals and accommodation are counted and grouped.

What additional definitions and groupings does your organisation require for Census 2031, if any, that were not used for Census 2021?

What additional definitions and groupings does your organisation require for Census 2031, if any, that were not used for Census 2021?:

The ONS currently produces outputs against the usually resident population, the daytime population and the out-of-term population

What additional population bases, if any, does your organisation require from Census 2031?

What additional population bases, if any, does your organisation require from Census 2031?:

Communal establishments

Does your organisation expect to use communal establishments data from Census 2031?

No

Harmonisation

In which topic areas or data items, if any, would greater harmonisation help your organisation bring together data from different sources more effectively? Please include detailed examples where a lack of harmonised standards has made it difficult to combine or compare data.

In which topic areas or data items, if any, would greater harmonisation help your organisation bring together data from different sources more effectively? Please include detailed examples where a lack of harmonised standards has made it difficult to combine or compare data. :

Anything else

What, if anything else, would you like to add about your organisation's Census 2031 data requirements?

What, if anything else, would you like to add about your organisation's Census 2031 data requirements? :

The Vegan Society has made it clear that veganism, as a philosophical belief should be included as a topic in the 2031 Censuses. This is not strictly a new topic, however, as the umbrella topic of belief is already included in the voluntary question on religion. Rather, we believe that Parliament erred by not requiring philosophical belief to be presented alongside religious belief under a Beliefs question in 2021.

The Equality Act 2010 makes explicit that philosophical beliefs, subject to the Grainger Criteria (Grainger plc v Nicholson 2009), must be given equal weight to religious beliefs.

The 2021 Census of England and Wales failed to do so (see <https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/census/censustransformationprogramme/questiondevelopment/census2021paperquestionnaires/householdenglandpdf.pdf>).

This apparently puts the Office of National Statistics in breach of The Equality Act 2010, and indicates that Parliament may have failed to apply proper scrutiny and Equality Impact Assessment processes.

This is despite The Vegan Society highlighting the philosophical belief of veganism as a protected by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (EHCR 1950) and the Equality Act 2010, significantly before the 2021 Census questions were finalised.

The Vegan Society therefore calls on the Office for National Statistics, and Parliament, to fulfil their duties under The Equality Act 2010, by including the

protected philosophical belief of veganism explicitly on the 2031 Census.

As people may hold more than two religious and philosophical beliefs together (including religious faith-informed veganism), this would need to be as a parallel voluntary question to the religion question, allowing for multiple answers to both.

We note that recent statistics suggest that around 1% of the population of England and Wales are vegan (The Vegan Society 2025). This is equivalent to roughly 700,000 people, meaning there are significantly more vegans in the UK than there are adherents to at least one of the six explicitly named religious beliefs given as voluntary options – alongside 'no religion', and 'any other religion, write in' – on the 2021 Census of England and Wales.

Thus, The Vegan Society believe the 2031 Census of England and Wales should include a voluntary question about philosophical belief which gives veganism as an explicit option, alongside the equivalent religious belief question, to put philosophical beliefs and veganism on an appropriate, equal footing with religious beliefs.

The Vegan Society would consider that a judicial review may be necessary if the 2031 Census does not do so.

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Thank you