



STATION 1 What is a protected characteristic?

Context

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) protects people from discrimination because of their serious philosophical beliefs. Article 9 of the ECHR protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (including philosophical beliefs) – a legally binding right, not just a guideline. The European Court of Human Rights and other courts have confirmed that veganism, a deeply held belief about avoiding animal exploitation and cruelty, falls within this right. Similarly, the Equality Act 2010 uses the term “protected characteristic” to describe personal features that are legally protected. One of those is “religion or belief”. In this category, belief means any religious or philosophical belief, as well as a lack of belief.¹

Discuss with your partner

What do you think makes a belief serious enough to deserve legal protection? What criteria would you use?



Key terms to include in your discussion

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR): A binding international treaty that protects fundamental rights and freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

Protected characteristic: Personal features that are legally protected.

¹ A short introduction to equality law and policy, House of Commons Library



STATION 2 Identity and belief

Context

People can hold multiple attributes and/or identities at once – cultural, religious, ethical and more. For some people, veganism is a central part of who they are, not just a dietary preference. For a belief to be treated this way in law, it must shape how a person lives – affecting choices beyond what they eat, including what they wear, buy, and how they engage with the world around them. This is known as ethical veganism and it is a protected philosophical belief under the Equality Act 2010.

Discuss with your partner

*How is an ethical belief
different from a lifestyle choice?
Does it matter, legally, which one
veganism is?*



Key terms to include in your discussion

Identity: the characteristics, traits and beliefs that define a person or group.

Ethical belief: a moral conviction about what is right or wrong.



STATION 3 Disagreement or discrimination?

Context

The law can protect serious and important beliefs but it does not prevent other people from disagreeing with that belief. The difficulty is knowing where ordinary disagreement ends and unlawful treatment begins. In 2019, an ethical vegan bank customer was told by a member of staff that “all vegans should be punched in the face” during a phone call about a loan application. The bank apologised, disciplined the staff member, and offered compensation. Because this event was resolved without legal proceedings, a court never had to decide whether this conduct was illegal under the Equality Act 2010.

Discuss with your partner

*Using
the definition below,
was the bank worker’s comment
harassment or rudeness? What’s the
difference between the two?*



Key terms to include in your discussion

Harassment: unwanted behaviour that violates someone’s dignity or creates an intimidating, humiliating or hostile environment.



STATION 4 How law changes over time

Context

Laws are not fixed forever. They develop to reflect changing social values and new situations. The Equality Act 2010 replaced earlier laws and developed to reflect these changes. Its concept of “philosophical belief” reflects Article 9 of The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) which protects people from discrimination due to their serious and important beliefs and convictions. The first time that ethical veganism was confirmed as qualifying for protection under the Equality Act was in 2020, when a judge said “...it would be both bizarre and... unlawful if a belief were recognised under the ECHR but not under the Equality Act 2010.”¹

Discuss with your partner

*What
does the fact that the law
sometimes needs to be clarified tell
us about how law works in the UK? Is it a
strength or weakness that courts can
develop the law by interpreting it in
new ways?*



Key terms to include in your discussion

Interpretation: the process by which courts decide the meaning of a law and how it applies in a particular case.

¹ This refers to the Casamitjana Case.



STATION 5 Citizens taking action

Context

When someone believes their rights have been breached, there are several routes they can take: bringing a case through the courts or a tribunal, campaigning, lobbying politicians, joining a pressure group (like The Vegan Society), or raising a direct complaint with an organisation. Each route has different strengths – a court case can result in a binding, legally enforceable outcome, while a direct complaint can sometimes be resolved more quickly but without the same legal weight.

Discuss with your partner

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the courts to bring about change, compared to other forms of citizenship action such as campaigning, lobbying, or making a direct complaint?



Key terms to include in your discussion

Lobbying: attempting to persuade politicians or decision-makers to support a cause.

Pressure group: an organisation that campaigns for a particular cause or interest.