



Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Defra  
Nobel House  
17 Smith Square  
London  
SW1P 3JR

14 May 2019

Dear Minister,

**Re: Closed petition 'Require plant-based options suitable for vegans on public sector menus every day'**

I am writing about the petition which 27,211 people signed and closed on 13 March 2019. We are disappointed that the petition will not be discussed in parliament but wanted to highlight some misunderstandings in the response we received from Defra.

We note Defra's response to our petition dated 28 November 2018 and were disappointed that the response did not fully address the main arguments behind our petition.

Firstly, the response states: "we do not think it appropriate to stipulate particular menus in the standards as these are best dealt with by meeting local customer demand."

This response avoids the fact that many institutions are not currently meeting local vegan demand, resulting in many vegans being left hungry and not being catered for in line with their protected philosophical belief.

The response does acknowledge that: "The number of people in the UK who eat a vegan diet has increased significantly over recent years and they have a legitimate expectation the food served in public sector establishments reflects this."

It is, however, not the case that these legitimate expectations are currently being met. We are regularly contacted by vegans who are in difficult situations, for example in hospitals or schools, and are struggling to get access to any vegan food or at least any healthy, nutritious vegan food. We have had reports of vegan hospital patients being offered dry toast, salad or crisps instead of a proper meal.

We also have reports from vegan parents whose children's school have informed them that they cannot provide anything for their child, meaning they are forced to provide their own food. Where the child is of free school meal age, they miss out on this benefit and are often the only child in the class who brings in their own

food, which can be alienating for them. In these cases, the state is currently failing to fulfil its obligations to these citizens.

Defra's response also ignored the wider benefits to society that offering vegan food on standard public sector menus would have for the environment and public health.

Building familiarity with plant-based foods will result in healthier, more environmentally-friendly longer-term diet choices.

Plant-based diets are better for the environment and can reduce an individual's food-related carbon emissions by up to 50%. The United Nations has urged a global move towards a meat and dairy free diet for the benefit of our planet. In addition to this, animal agriculture is responsible for up to 91% of Amazon destruction (forests are destroyed for grazing or to grow feed for animals) and for more greenhouse gas emissions than all direct emissions from the global transport sector.

Last year, researchers at Oxford University concluded that adopting a vegan diet is the single biggest way to reduce an individual's impact on the planet. This is far bigger than reducing the number of flights taken or even switching to an electric vehicle. The United Nations IPCC report warned us that we have until 2030 to avert catastrophic temperature increases by limiting global warming to 1.5 C. 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.

The environmental case is clear that globally, including here in the UK, we need to be shifting towards a more plant-based diet, if we are to have any chance of averting catastrophic temperature increases. This change would play a vital role in helping that shift to happen, something that has been overlooked by your department's response.

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

There are benefits to making vegan meals available to everyone. Typically higher in fruits, vegetables, grains and pulses, 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.

Poor diet is estimated to cost the NHS £5.8 billion annually, more than smoking, alcohol or physical inactivity. The UK is currently woefully short of meeting the recommended five portions of fruit and veg a day (the average is 3.8 according to the National Diet and Nutrition Survey), so increasing availability and accessibility

of vegan food in public sector settings could be part of the long-term solution to these issues.

The UK vegan population continues to soar, having doubled twice in the last four years, as more and more people are seeing the benefit of plant-based food. The private sector has responded with a huge increase in vegan options in supermarkets, restaurants, pubs and other shops. The public sector can be a lot slower to respond, so we feel that the government should act to ensure that vegans can access suitable food when they need it and to act on climate change and public health crises.

In 2017, Portugal became the first country in the world to implement a law compelling all public sector institutions to offer a vegan meal on their standard menus without people having to make a special request. California has also passed legislation in September 2018, guaranteeing hospital patients and prisoners a healthy plant-based option at every meal. California's economy is the 5<sup>th</sup> biggest in the world (behind USA, China, Japan & Germany), with a population of just under 40 million people.

It seems likely that more and more nations and states will begin to adopt this approach of guaranteeing plant-based food in the public sector over the coming years. The UK has the opportunity to join these pioneering administrations in leading the way in terms of meaningfully tackling climate change and diet-related public health crises, whilst also protecting the ever-growing number of UK vegans.

Yours sincerely



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