

John Swinney MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills
The Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

21 November 2019

Also by email: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Dear Mr Swinney,

Re: Vegan Food Provision in Schools

We are writing in relation to the lack of fully plant-based (vegan) meal options in Scotland's schools.

Current Position

Scotland's schools do not generally have meals on their daily canteen menus that are suitable for vegans, *i.e.* containing no animal products. Given the increasing scientific consensus on the health benefits of plant-based eating, as well as the recognition that plant diets are the most sustainable and have the lowest carbon footprint, this is quite shocking in and of itself. More problematic still is the fact that this means that vegan pupils are not catered for at all in Scottish schools.

While some vegan parents have managed to secure suitable food for their children through discussion with the school and/or Local Authority ("LA"), many have been refused provision in a number of Local Authority areas, and often over a period of many years. We know this from discussion with vegan parents and children and from having been contacted by them for assistance.

In some cases, parents have been informed that vegan pupils will not be provided with suitable food because veganism is a "lifestyle choice." In fact, the vegan moral conviction that it is wrong to use and kill other animals is a protected belief under human rights and equality law, with the same status as a religious belief and so vegans have the right to access suitable food, including when in school. The Scottish Government, in turn, has a legal obligation to ensure that vegans are provided for in compliance with its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights and the Equality Act 2010. For more

information on the legal rights of vegans please see the following pages of our website:
<https://goveganworld.com/vegan-rights/>

For vegan children it is essential that they have access to suitable food, as they have made a moral commitment not to consume animals or substances taken from animals. That moral commitment has protection in law because people must be able to live according to their fundamental moral beliefs. It is unconscionable that there are children in Scotland who hold that moral belief and yet are put into a situation whereby the only food available to them in school contains animal products. Due to lack of provision they are being denied their entitlement to free school meals in P1-P3 and subsidised meals thereafter, which is clearly discriminatory.

In addition to a failure, and in some cases outright refusal, to provide suitable food for vegan children, we are also aware of many instances of children being misinformed in school that they need to consume animal flesh and other animals products for health, despite the fact that the NHS and the British Dietetics Association recognise that we can get all the nutrients we need on a vegan diet. (See: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-vegan-diet/>; [https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/plant-based diet](https://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts/plant-based-diet)) We are even aware of vegan children who have been pressurised by school staff, including teachers and head teachers, to consume animal products against their moral convictions.

Petition for Vegan Options

In light of the failure to provide for vegans and given the urgent need to increase plant-based provision for the environment and climate change, a petition was launched seeking to have it made a legal requirement that at least one fully plant-based (vegan) option be made available in all of Scotland's public canteens every day. This would have followed the example of Portugal, where such a law was introduced in 2017.

The petition secured over 8,000 signatures, one of the largest responses to a Scottish petition as we understand it, and extensive evidence was provided by Go Vegan Scotland (a volunteer advocacy group) regarding the impact on vegan families of the failure to provide suitable food, and from the Vegan Society on health, nutrition and the environment. The evidence session can be viewed here:

<https://www.scottishparliament.tv/meeting/public-petitions-committee-december-6-2018>

and the statements submitted in support of the petition here:

<http://www.parliament.scot/gettinginvolved/petitions/cateringforeveryone>

Nevertheless, the petition was unceremoniously dropped by the Scottish Parliament Petition Committee on 5 September 2019 with no action taken. This was a very disappointing outcome. The abrupt dismissal of the petition after so much effort on the part of the petitioners and supporters does little to encourage engagement in the petition process. It was particularly disappointing to hear the Scottish Government's contribution, in which they inaccurately asserted that veganism has no protection in law. This conflicts with previous statements made by the Scottish Government, in which they had recognised that the vegan moral conviction is indeed protected.

Although the Petition Committee undertook to write to NHS Health Boards, the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and to Local Authorities, given that schools were covered by the petition, no responses appear to have been received from Local Authorities confirming what vegan options they offer in schools. We have

reviewed the websites of Scotland's LA's ourselves to locate what information is available about daily school menus. Not all Councils share the menu on their website, but from those that do it is clear that there are no options marked suitable for vegans.

Special Request Provision

Given the failure of the Scottish Parliament to take up the opportunity to recommend legislative action, we have been working with vegan families on an individual case-by-case basis to secure suitable food for children through special arrangements. In each case a vegan parent has contacted us to let us know that they have been refused suitable meals for their child in school, despite their legal rights.

Through rounds of correspondence and meetings we have secured vegan meal provision for families in Glasgow, Edinburgh, the Scottish Borders, South Lanarkshire and East Renfrewshire. We are also aware that vegan parents secured provision in West Dumbartonshire. These LA's have also confirmed that they will provide vegan meals on request to other vegan children. Given their previous complete refusal to provide, this has been a considerable step forward. However, it is insufficient to discharge the Scottish Government's legal obligations.

Public Sector Equality Duty

The Public Sector Equality Duty, applicable to all public bodies in terms of the Equality Act 2010, requires public bodies to go further than making provision on request. There is a positive duty to remove disadvantages and advance equal opportunity, with a view to creating a truly inclusive environment.

Where vegan children have to make special arrangements to secure suitable food they face barriers to access: they and their parents may not be aware that they can request vegan food; requests for special provision depend upon a child having supportive and attentive parents/carers who are able and willing to make a special request and follow up to ensure it is being implemented properly day to day. They are also singled out as different, often having to notify the school canteen each morning if they intend to have a school meal that day and/or wear some form of identification so that the canteen staff know they are to receive a vegan meal, such as a differently coloured wrist band. Given that we know vegan children often experience bullying and harassment, not only from other pupils but in some cases from school staff including teachers, these arrangements are far from ideal and do not foster an inclusive environment.

In addition, special arrangements increase the likelihood of error, as they often involve modifications being made to standard recipes. As the provision of vegan options on request is not accompanied by any training of school canteen staff or teachers about veganism, it is not surprising that mistakes are made due to misunderstandings.

A truly inclusive environment for vegan children, in terms of food provision, would be one in which suitable food was available every day on the regular canteen menu, clearly identified as such, available to all children. This would avoid the need for arrangements being made in advance or singling out vegan children as different, and it would minimise the risk of error as the recipe would be the same for the whole batch of that meal. It would also make food delivery more straightforward for those involved in preparing and

serving food in schools, as they would not have to manage special arrangements for vegan children.

Introducing fully plant-based (vegan) meals on school menus would also have significant benefits in terms of the environment and climate change.

Environment and Climate Change

There is increasing consensus among the scientific community that a plant-based diet is optimal for health and sustainability. For example:

- In 2016, the Oxford Martin Institute compared the impact of standard and plant-based diets. The report showed that the less animal products we consume the better. If a 100% plant diet were adopted by the year 2050, it could save 8 million human lives, reduce greenhouse gas emissions by two thirds, and lead to healthcare and climate-change related savings of \$1.5 trillion (US). *Analysis and valuation of the health and climate change cobenefits of dietary change*, Marco Springmann, H. Charles J. Godfray, Mike Rayner, and Peter Scarborough
- In June 2018, a report in the journal Science highlighted the major contribution of animal agriculture to Greenhouse Gas emissions and recommended transferring subsidies to plant agriculture and taxing meat and dairy production. Lead author Joseph Poore stated: "A vegan diet is probably the single biggest way to reduce your impact on planet Earth, not just greenhouse gases, but global acidification, eutrophication, land use and water use.....It is far bigger than cutting down on your flights or buying an electric car." *Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers*, J. Poore, T. Nemecek
- In January 2019 the EAT–Lancet Commission published a report on the work of 30 world-leading scientists from across the globe, who reviewed extensive data and scientific studies in order to reach a consensus on what constitutes a healthy and sustainable diet. The report concluded that a food system that is sustainable and provides a healthy diet for all is one based on plants. *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems*, The Lancet Commissions, Vol 393, Issue 10170

In recognition of these scientific reports, in October this year Imperial College London produced a report for the UK Committee on Climate Change: *Behaviour change, public engagement and Net Zero*. Carmichael, R. (2019):

<https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/behaviour-change-public-engagement-and-net-zero-imperial-college-london/>

The report notes that as the public sector provides 30% of all UK meals it has a critical role to play in the transition to plant-based food consumption, but that currently the sector is seriously lacking in the provision of vegan options:

"Supermarkets, food manufacturers and restaurants in the private sector are responding to this surge in consumer interest in plant-based foods with innovative products. But while consumer demand and the private sector are clearly ahead, policy and the public sector are trailing far behind. One of the barriers to shifting diets is the difficulty in finding plant-based menu options. While growing demand

Registered in Ireland as a Company Limited By Guarantee established on a not-for-profit basis with
Registration Number: 624605.

Registered office: Chamberstown House, Chamberstown Slane, Meath, C15 X795.
Directors: Sandra Higgins and Clara Mozes (German)

exists, limited availability is a major bottleneck for change which restricts choice, reinforces traditional diets and discourages shifts in behaviour.”

“Schools in the UK serve between 6-7 million school lunches per day. Most schools will provide a vegan meal on request but this requires submitting a ‘Special Diet Request Form’ to the catering company and the child is then restricted to only vegan options and these vegan options are not available to other pupils who might want to try them.”

“In addition, cow’s milk is subsidised and, like water, is included for free with school meals while fruit juices and plant milks, if available, cost the pupil extra”.
(p 51 -52)

Reiterating a point we made above, the report also notes:

“For schoolchildren, being seen to be on (and restricted to) a ‘Special Diet’ of vegan foods not available to others sets them apart from other children, enforces rigid identities, is potentially stigmatising and is certainly a divisive and unnecessary obstacle to shifting eating habits.” (p 53)

The report recommends the introduction of legislation “requiring that all public-sector catering menus offer a fully plant-based (vegan) option that is available to anyone every day without special request.” This is precisely what was being sought from the Scottish Parliament through the petition referred to above.

Fully plant-based meals in schools

In recognition of the environmental, climate change and health benefits of eating plant-based, the introduction of fully plant-based (vegan) meals onto school menus is gaining momentum in many places. For example:

- all schools in the New York City public school district now offer a vegan option every day. The Coalition for Healthy School Food has worked to assist in this introduction, with meals including Mexican Chili and Lentil Stew;
- in California the State Assembly has passed a bill that would provide extra funding to schools that add or increase the number of vegan meals on their menus;
- four cities in Brazil are transitioning all meals served in public schools to plant-based by the end of 2019, and
- in Portugal it has been a legal requirement since 2017 that all public bodies provide vegan options in their canteens.

Encourage the Introduction of Plant-Based Meals

The need to offer fully plant-based (vegan) meals in Scottish schools is clear and urgent. We invite you to confirm that you will take steps to promote this across Scotland, in order to ensure that the legal rights of vegans are complied with and to ensure that all pupils have healthy, sustainable meal options.

Registered in Ireland as a Company Limited By Guarantee established on a not-for-profit basis with
Registration Number: 624605.

Registered office: Chamberstown House, Chamberstown Slane, Meath, C15 X795.
Directors: Sandra Higgins and Clara Mozes (German)

If the introduction is managed well, with good, tasty meals offered to children, they should prove to be very popular. The experience of others, such as The Coalition for Healthy School Food in New York, has been that it greatly increases the likelihood of success if education is provided alongside the introduction of plant-based meals. In any event, pupils have a right to balanced information about different types of food, including what it means for animals when we use them for food, and the comparative environmental impact of different foods, as well the impact on health and nutrition. It also greatly assists if pupils are involved in tasting sessions, so that they participate in selecting the meals that will be added to menus.

We would be very happy to assist with this. We have experience of giving talks and cooking demonstrations in schools, high schools and primary schools, with very positive feedback from pupils and teachers alike.

We can also make practical suggestions based on our experience working with the private and public sectors. For example, we would recommend that the word “vegan” not be used in the name or description of meals that are suitable for vegans, and instead (vg) or (sfv) be added at the end, so that vegans know the dish is suitable for them. For example: “Mexican Bean Stew (sfv)”. This is very common in cafes and restaurants and makes it less likely that non-vegans will avoid a meal based on a preconception about vegan food or a misunderstanding that it is only for vegans.

Please could you consider these proposals and let us know if we can be of any assistance in the introduction of fully plant-based (vegan) meals in Scotland’s schools. We look forward to hearing from you just as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Barbara Bolton
Legal Counsel
Go Vegan World
Barbara.bolton@goveganworld.com