



The Vegan Society Response: WEC Call for Evidence Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics

1.1 The Inquiry:

“The Committee has been concerned to hear that people with protected characteristics are disproportionately affected by Covid-19 and the Government’s response, including the emergency Coronavirus Bill. We are particularly interested to hear about what impact these measures have had, and will continue to have, and whether the Government’s aim to support workers and people more widely have considered all relevant equality impacts. The Committee is calling for written submissions about:”

1.2 Your experiences. We want to know:

1.2.1 How people have been affected by the illness or the response to it

The protected characteristic of ‘religion or belief’ as an umbrella term. In January 2020, an employment tribunal in England confirmed that veganism comes within the scope of legal protection under the Equality Act 2010, specifically as a philosophical belief within the meaning of section 10 of the Act.

More broadly, vegans are protected under the right to freedom of conscience under The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights, ECHR) as well as the Equality Act 2010. The 2020 Coronavirus Act must take into account human rights standards and equality provisions and ensure that individuals are not disproportionately affected by emergency provisions.

The human right to freedom of conscience places very strict limits on state interference and requires the state to observe both positive and negative duties. Even in time of war, the state cannot interfere with the practice of individuals protected under this right, and the state is obliged to ensure vegans are given due regard in emergency social provisions. The needs of people with protected philosophical beliefs in general, and of vegans in particular, are underrepresented in current Coronavirus legislation. As a result, we are already aware of evidence that vegans are suffering specific harmful impacts.

The UK Government is obliged to fulfill the international human right to food, which is defined as “The availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture”.

To comply with international human rights obligations, this provision requires states to understand and give due regard to the needs of people with protected philosophical beliefs, including vegans. However, emergency Coronavirus legislation does not address the provision of vegan food adequately.



1.2.2 If there have been specific impacts on people due to them having a protected characteristic

Vegans have been negatively impacted by the Government's response to the pandemic.

'Extremely vulnerable' vegans in the UK who are 'shielding' during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic are reliant upon Government support for their food supply. Such shielding vegans have been unfairly discriminated against. Despite asking 'shielding' people about their dietary needs, food packages are still being delivered without taking dietary preferences into account.

"For now, food supplies will be delivered in standard packages. Check the ingredients lists carefully if you have a food allergy or follow a special diet. If you have special dietary requirements, some of the food may not meet them." (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable>)

This potentially puts the health of shielding vegans at risk. 'Checking ingredients carefully' is not a sufficient accommodation to meet specific dietary needs. In particular, a health balanced vegan diet needs positive inclusion of specific foods, not just the exclusion of things from animals. For example, vegans need daily sources of foods made from pulses, and sources of plant-based essential fats, as well as access to appropriate fortified foods including vegan-friendly vitamin D whilst people are not able to get out in the sun daily.

Vegans on low incomes have, in some instances, not been able to access adequate vegan provision via local government schemes or food banks. One vegan was given vouchers for the shop chain, 'Farmfoods' by Glasgow City Council with which they were supposed to feed their family. However, Farmfoods is not an adequate option to provide nutritious vegan food. For example, Farmfoods lack provision of fortified plant milks, which provide essential nutrients in a vegan diet.

Another source of discrimination are the ways in which supermarkets have implemented purchasing restrictions. Many supermarkets have restrictions on the quantities of plant milk which a customer may buy which are disproportionate to those implemented for cow's dairy milk. In some instances, customers were able to purchase 6 pints of cow's dairy milk but just 2 litres of plant milk. Fortified plant milks are typically an important part of vegan diets, and therefore, this restriction also has potentially harmful health impacts.

The supply of lacto- and/or ovo-vegetarian (containing cow's milk, eggs etc.) or meat-based food boxes by supermarkets disadvantages vegans. Morrisons, for example, are offering boxes to feed 2 adults for a week but there are none suitable for vegans.

1.2.3 Whether there may be unforeseen consequences to measures brought in to ease the burden on frontline staff, for example relaxing the measures under the Mental Health Act and Care Act)

It is vital that vegans who are under the care of institutions – including vegans who may be detained in secure facilities, as well as those in medical care – are supported to communicate their needs in line with their protected philosophical belief. All vegans within institutions must be provided with a reliable, nutritious diet of foods which are suitable for vegans. This must always be the case – even where vegans are sufficiently unwell that their self-care ability, to ensure for themselves that they are following a vegan diet and lifestyle, may be reduced.



1.3 Reviewing the measures

“The Government has said current measures will be reviewed in three weeks’ time, and measures in the Coronavirus Bill be voted on again in 6 months’ time.”

1.3.1 What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in three weeks’ time;

Recommendations:

The Coronavirus Act 2020 should be updated to include explicit reference to the provision of food for vegans in all public authority contexts and refer to the private sector duty not to discriminate in the provision of goods and services. To protect the rights of vegans, existing provisions should be amended and additional measures should be included.

All food support schemes, whether initiated at local or national level, should ensure adequate food supply for vegans.

Supermarkets should be directed to ensure that restrictions on vegan foods – for example, plant milk purchasing restrictions – are not stricter than those for non-vegan equivalents – for example, cow’s dairy milk.

1.3.2 What needs to change or improve, which could be acted on in 6 months’ time.

Food supply

From The Coronavirus Act 2020, Section 25 Food Supply:

1. Food supply chains: Rationale for intervention

“In the event of disruption to food supply chains due to the outbreak of coronavirus, the Government may seek to intervene to support industry efforts to restore efficient and equitable supply. The Government response to food supply disruption currently relies on information which is provided by industry on a voluntary, regular basis to Defra during the disruption. Without the provision of information from industry, Government is unable to develop an accurate view, making it difficult to support any industry response and inform a proportionate and effective Government response.

“Defra has drafted these clauses (Food Supply Chains (Information)) which would give the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs the power to require the provision of specified information (e.g. on the location of certain food stocks). This would be required from individual companies/members of the food supply chain, in the event of disruption to food supply, and in the event that industry does not provide information to Government when asked.

“Given our preference to continue to collaborate with industry on a voluntary basis, Defra does not wish to activate these clauses unless the power is required. Safeguards have been drafted into the clauses to ensure that they could not be used in any other situation.”



The Coronavirus Act 2020 Section 29 sets out ‘Meaning of “food supply chain” and related expressions’, but does not include sufficient information. The legislation should be expanded to include an adequate definition of ‘food’ so that the dietary needs of those with protected characteristics are met.

The Act should include explicit reference to the provision of food for vegans in all public authority contexts and refer to the private sector duty not to discriminate in the provision of goods and services. For example, Article 2 of Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 (laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety) defines food as:

“any substance or product, whether processed, partially processed or unprocessed, intended to be, or reasonably expected to be ingested by humans.”

Improved clarity is needed to ensure specific foods which are both suitable for vegans and which are key ingredients in a balanced vegan diet – such as fortified plant-based milk alternatives, plant sources of essential fats, as well as whole or lightly processed grains, pulses, nuts and seeds – are positively included in emergency intervention in food supply logistics.

Food logistics should meet the dietary needs of vegans. The powers granted to the Defra Secretary, appropriate Scottish and Welsh Ministers, and DAERA in NI to intervene in the food supply chain should explicitly reference protected characteristics, and the dietary needs of vegans.

The human right to food is directly related to rights in institutional circumstances – including health settings, schools and prisons – where a significant proportion of daily nutrition is provided centrally. Therefore, these contexts should explicitly be considered by Government in emergency and ongoing food logistics and provision. Emergency food logistics extend to the supply of meals delivered to older vegans, and vegans of school age eating at home.

The Coronavirus Act should also include a reference to private sector equality duty as vegans are currently disadvantaged in the provision of goods and services.

Treatments and vaccines

Currently, the development of treatments and vaccines, such as the work being done on SARS-CoV-2 and COVID19, involves the use of non-human animals. The Alliance for Human Relevant Science states, “The UK is a world leader in life science research. Yet many breakthroughs are lost in translation from pre-clinical animal models to humans. There is now a tremendous opportunity to bridge the translational gap with human relevant technologies. It is time to focus on the human.”

By focusing on humans, effective SARS-CoV-2 and COVID19 treatments and vaccines can be developed which avoid the use of non-human animals. This also meets the needs of vegans for medicine in line with our protected philosophical beliefs.

Wider Lessons on Pandemics

There must be serious consideration of the potential for the emergence of further potentially fatal pathogens at epidemic and pandemic level. A large number of human viral infections are believed to



be zoonotic. A large proportion of zoonotic disease risk is believed to be related to human agricultural activities.

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which often cause upper-respiratory tract illnesses, including some variations of what we call 'the common cold'. Hundreds of types of coronaviruses are present and are known to cause diseases of varying severity in non-human animals, particularly mammals and birds. Seven kinds of coronavirus are currently known to cause disease in humans. Four are very rarely if ever fatal: two forms of the usually mild 'common cold' (alpha coronavirus 229E and beta coronavirus OC43) and two other viruses causing acute respiratory diseases human coronaviruses NL63 (HCoV-NL63) and HKU1 (HCoV-HKU1).

Currently three coronaviruses are known to cause potentially fatal disease in humans: SARS-CoV (2002 - 2004) caused severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). MERS-CoV (2012 – present) causes Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). Now, SARS-CoV-2 (2019 – present) causes coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

The more contact between non-human animals and humans, the greater the opportunity for a novel pathogen to cross into humans. A significant number of coronaviruses are now known to be circulating in animals bred artificially in large numbers for industrial farming. We need to dramatically cut the risk of further zoonotic pandemics. Therefore, we urgently need to move away from farming animals – including the practices of artificially breeding animals to farm, and keeping farmed animals in artificial conditions such as any kind of indoor or outdoor confinement.

We also need to urgently stop habitat destruction caused by agriculture. By moving toward plant-based farming techniques, we can produce all our food on existing farmland and significantly reduce the land needed for farming. Therefore, we can remove the need to increase the extend of land converted for agriculture.

References: The Alliance for Human Relevant Science <https://www.humanrelevantscience.org/>

The USA National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Coronavirus information:
<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/coronaviruses>

The USA Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Coronaviruses information
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/types.html>

Grow Green
<https://www.vegansociety.com/take-action/campaigns/grow-green>