

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM



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FAO: Minister for Health Robin Swann MLA
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Dear Minister for Health Robin Swann MLA

Re: APPG Inquiry Report: Respect for religious and philosophical beliefs while eating in care

We are writing regarding the recent publication of an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) Inquiry Report, [Respect for religious and philosophical beliefs while eating in care](#). This document was published in November 2021 by the APPG on Vegetarianism and Veganism.

The report, referencing various case studies, raised a series of concerns about how individuals' values and beliefs are failing to be respected whilst eating in care. Case studies were brought to light where lifelong vegans and vegetarians were given fish or meat, going against their fundamental beliefs and values. It is estimated that more than 10% of the UK population may have dietary restrictions owing to religious or philosophical beliefs.

Dietary choices, such as veganism or vegetarianism, can be a fundamental aspect of someone's cultural or religious identity. People have a basic human right to be able to practice their beliefs. Naturally, to ensure that people have dignity in care, their beliefs and values must be fully respected.

Care is a devolved power. As such, the four recommendations in the report reflect the regional variations in how care is regulated. The recommendations suggest how to better protect the rights of those receiving care in relation to philosophical and religious beliefs around food and diet. With regards to these recommendations, we would like to raise some questions around how the department could improve the position of those receiving care.

Firstly, the inquiry recommended amendments to Northern Irish legislation to protect the beliefs of those receiving care. Changes were recommended to the wording of the regulations, in particular the Residential Care Homes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005: 12.5.c. It was suggested to introduce the concepts of 'religious or philosophical beliefs' and 'cultural background' into the wording of these regulations.

1. In light of this recommendation, would the Minister consider amending the wording of the Residential Care Homes Regulations in line with the suggested wording (as noted in recommendation one of the Inquiry Report)?

While only a small change in wording, this amendment would widen the scope of the protections afforded to those receiving care. The regulations would protect dietary preferences, reflecting the diverse foundations that underpin a person's belief system. This would also reflect recent interpretations of the Equality Act 2010, that have recognised non-religious belief systems as constituting protected characteristics, such as ethical veganism.

Secondly, in line with regulatory change, the report also suggested that regulatory guidance is adjusted to include the concepts of dietary practice relating to 'philosophical or religious or cultural background.' The change was recommended to indicator E1 in both *Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) Provider Guidance 2019–20 Adult Residential Care Homes* and *RQIA Provider Guidance 2019–20 Nursing Homes – Nutrition relating to dietary needs*.

2. In line with this recommendation, would the minister consider discussing this proposed change with RQIA and suggesting the amended wording?

Third, the Inquiry Report noted that there are 'no formal entry requirements' to becoming a care worker in Northern Ireland, though individuals are required to carry out local induction training. The Inquiry Report recommended that mandatory qualifications should be brought in for staff which include explanations of dietary beliefs.

3. Has the Northern Irish Government considered how to regulate the training that care workers receive regarding the cultural, religious and dietary needs of those receiving care? What plans does the government have regarding regulating the training of care workers and bringing changes into force? (As suggested in recommendation three of the Inquiry Report.)

Quality care can only be provided by well trained staff. We are particularly interested in how the government envisions ensuring that all staff in the care sector understand the beliefs of those they care for and are enabled to support individuals to practice their beliefs. We feel that more regulation is needed around the training of care staff.

Finally, recommendation four of the report suggested amending the visual guides on display in catering areas of care facilities. Would the Minister consider reviewing this recommendation and suggesting this change in guidance to the Care Inspectorate? We share a vision where all receive quality care, provided with dignity and respect. A fundamental aspect of this is

ensuring that people can live according to their beliefs and are able to control basic aspects of their belief systems such as diet.

We look forward to your response to these questions and hope that we can work constructively with you to support enhancements where necessary.

Yours sincerely,

Officers of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Vegetarianism and Veganism

Christina Rees MP, Chair
Henry Smith MP, Vice-Chair
Kerry McCarthy MP, Vice-Chair
Darren Jones MP, Vice-Chair