

# René Cassin: Submission to the Right to Food UK Commission

## Executive Summary

- René Cassin, the Jewish voice for human rights, consulted with Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Bahá'í, and Christian communities across the UK to understand how faith-appropriate food is accessed.
- The right to food requires that food be available, accessible, adequate, and sustainable. Food that does not meet cultural, health, or dignity needs does not fulfil this right.
- Current food systems in public and private sectors often assume diets are interchangeable. In practice, this harms the ability to access appropriate food in hospitals, schools, and other public services. It can also cause a reliance on nutritionally inadequate alternatives.
- These failures shape lives by determining where people can live, influencing school choices, and limiting participation in public life.
- Faith communities fill gaps through charitable and informal provision, but this is uneven and under-resourced and often hidden from public systems.
- Market forces do not guarantee access. They can drive up the costs of appropriate food, create inequalities within communities, and reinforce a false “competition” between communities.
- A right to food framework would establish the relationship around access as being between duty-bearers and rights-holders, rather than consumers and a range of actors across public, private, and third sectors.
- A right to food framework would also ensure dignity, inclusion, and equality in accessing adequate food and support communities.
- Any right to food framework or roadmap should:
  1. Ensure food adequacy, including cultural and religious appropriateness, across public services such as schools, hospitals, care settings, and asylum accommodation.
  2. Avoid one-size-fits-all provision, recognising that different communities face different barriers to accessing appropriate food.
  3. Require training and guidance for those involved in food procurement and catering, so that dietary requirements are understood and implemented accurately, rather than assumed or approximated.
  4. Consult affected communities directly, rather than relying solely on census or aggregate data, which respondents noted often undercounts or misrepresents smaller communities.
  5. Provide accountability and routes to redress when food provision repeatedly fails to meet adequacy standards.

## Introduction

### Who we are

This evidence is submitted by René Cassin, drawing on qualitative testimonies gathered from representatives of Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Bahá'í, and Christian communities and frontline food providers across the UK. Our focus is on how access to food intersects with cultural and religious identity, dignity, health, and equality, and what this means for the realisation of the right to food in practice.

René Cassin is the UK's only Jewish human rights organisation. Our mission - grounded in Jewish teachings, values of dignity and justice, and the community's historical experience of discrimination - is to promote and protect human rights in the UK.

René Cassin is a part of the UK's ESCR Network and is proud to support the submission to this consultation by JustFair, the Network convener. René Cassin is also convenor of the Jewish Everyday Rights Forum, a collection of Jewish frontline organisations and individuals who come together to discuss the economic and cultural rights needs of the Jewish community, as reflected in their work. This submission incorporates the barriers to the realisation of the right to food brought up by the Forum, and by many other communities we were proud to speak to.

In this consultation response, we respond to questions 1 and 2 of the consultation, pertaining to the challenges facing faith communities in accessing adequate food, and how these communities access adequate food, respectively. We also respond to question 10, on what a right to food law should consider regarding adequate food.

### A note on adequacy

The right to food, as a part of human rights more generally, is widely understood to stand on four pillars: availability, accessibility, adequacy, and sustainability. Adequacy is central to this submission. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defines adequate food as food which satisfies dietary needs, is safe, and is culturally acceptable. Food that is technically available but not accessible in a way that respects dignity, health, and identity cannot be considered adequate. There is no meaningful right to food without adequacy, as when a food policy treats diets as interchangeable, access exists in theory but fails in practice, and people are effectively excluded from their rights.

### Faith approaches to food

There is no fixed definition of faith and/or religion under UK common law. However, freedom of religion is a vital part of British law and directly protected by Article 9 of the Human Rights Act (corresponding with Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights). Article 9 protects one's right to hold both religious and non-religious beliefs. It also protects one's right to manifest one's beliefs, for example, through religious clothing, through worship, or – importantly to this submission – through diet and other food practices. For many communities, food is not a preference but an aspect of identity, dignity, and religious observance.

Many faith groups have specific dietary needs, which apply not only to what food can and cannot be consumed, but also how that food is prepared and how it is consumed. Furthermore, dietary needs change at different times, with some communities having festivals where new food prohibitions come in, or a fasting period starts, and some faith groups eat different foods on different days.

Different faith communities face different challenges based on their notions of food adequacy as well as other conditions of the community, such as geography, interactions with other public services, and wider economic factors such as import controls, food regulations and economies of scale.

Furthermore, some faith groups do not interpret food laws universally. Individuals may interpret or apply dietary laws differently based on practice, denomination, or personal belief. For example, Hindu respondents highlighted that fasting practices vary significantly between individuals, while Jewish respondents noted differences between *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardi* dietary norms.<sup>1</sup> This understandably contributes to a difficulty for public service providers and people who work in food procurement to understand the nuances within faith communities in food access.

However, this misunderstanding has a stark impact on the ability of people to access their right to food. Variation does not negate obligation. Rather, it requires systems that are responsive, informed, and capable of engaging directly with communities. Failure to understand this complexity results in exclusion that is often treated as inevitable, rather than as a correctable failure of provision.

Meeting these obligations also requires that those responsible for food provision - including schools, hospitals, and local authorities - are adequately resourced, trained, and supported. Without this, even well-intentioned systems will fall short in practice.

At the same time, ensuring food adequacy creates a positive opportunity: a society in which individuals can participate fully in public life, confident that their cultural and religious identities will be recognised and accommodated, rather than treated as an exception.

## **Question 1: Food insecurity in the UK, challenges and solutions that are having a positive impact**

Our evidence shows that food insecurity in the UK is not only a matter of insufficient income or food supply, but also of food adequacy, particularly cultural and religious appropriateness. Across faith communities, the absence of appropriate food has significant and often hidden consequences for health, participation, and social cohesion.

### **Impact on participation and life choices**

Several respondents described how a lack of culturally appropriate food shapes major life decisions. It determines things such as the areas (and in some cases nations) where people live, the schools that parents send their children to, and whether individuals can access services such as hospitals or care settings. It also significantly impacts access to other economic necessities, such as housing and impacts intercommunal as well as intracommunal cohesion.

A respondent from the Belfast Jewish community described a dwindling of the community, as, following Brexit-related trade changes, access to kosher food had become so limited and expensive that observant Jews could not realistically remain in Northern Ireland. Many people in faith communities choose to live close together for a variety of reasons. However, those who wish to live

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<sup>1</sup> Ashkenazi traditions originate in European Jewish communities, and Sephardi traditions originating in Middle Eastern, North African, and Iberian Jewish communities, making them two different Jewish ethnic groups.

outside established community hubs should be able to do so without having their freedom of religion limited in practice. Poor access to food directly impacts this.

Respondents from Muslim, Jewish and Sikh communities similarly described parents feeling forced to send children to faith schools primarily because these were the only settings able to provide appropriate meals. One respondent expressed sadness that they perceived as the dilemma between providing their children with a spiritual life and providing their children with valuable cross-communal life experience.

### **Impact on health and nutrition**

Food insecurity also affects nutrition and health outcomes. One frontline provider described a situation in which children at a school reliant on a single Kosher caterer “were effectively eating the same sandwich every day for a year,” raising concerns about malnutrition. A balanced, healthy diet is part of the adequacy aspect of the right to food.

Hospital food provision was a recurring issue across faiths. In areas where faith communities are not adequately captured in census or other public data or are considered too small by local services to be catered for, it is not uncommon for individuals in hospitals to go without appropriate food altogether. Many faith representatives highlighted the same phenomenon where someone could access a meal based on their religious diet or advised medical diet, but not one which satisfied both religious and health needs e.g. a meal which was both Halal and gluten-free. One Rabbi we spoke to reflected, “It’s a lovely meal, but it’s not a lovely meal for them.”

A consistent theme across testimonies was that exclusion often arises not from hostility, but from incorrect assumptions and a lack of understanding. Common patterns include assuming Halal or vegetarian options meet all needs, misunderstanding religious dietary laws, and mislabelling food as appropriate when it is not. However, this is not solely a question of awareness, but of capacity. Those responsible for delivering food provision are often operating under significant time and resource constraints, limiting their ability to engage meaningfully with the needs of different communities. Ensuring the right to food therefore requires not only guidance, but adequate resourcing and institutional support.

Mislabelling was a recurring issue. Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu respondents all described receiving food labelled as appropriate, which, in practice, was not. A Hindu representative recounted ordering a “Hindu vegetarian” meal from a major airline that arrived containing chicken, and being told this was acceptable. Similar issues were reported in schools, hospitals, and food banks. These issues are not minor. They undermine trust and can lead individuals to avoid services altogether. In practice, this can result in isolation and exclusion, particularly in settings such as schools, hospitals, and care environments, where individuals may feel unable to participate in shared meals or must rely on alternatives that are nutritionally or socially inadequate.

### **One-size-fits-all approaches**

The assumption that a single food model can serve all communities leads to exclusion. This is particularly clear in relation to Sikh dietary requirements, which prohibit meat where the animal has been part of a ritual slaughter process, such as Kosher or Halal meat. A respondent from the Sikh community reported that his daughter’s school changed all meat meals to Halal without informing the parents, and he only found out because he was a school governor. In this case, the respondent felt

that there was no attempt to mislead, but simply an assumption by decision-makers at the school that Halal food would be a lowest-common-denominator meal that satisfied all non-vegetarian students.

The issues in this approach are not limited to public sector providers. In the private sector, without better regulation, there is no market correction to food services being designed around majority assumptions, rather than rights-based inclusion. For example, a Sikh respondent reported that certain restaurants will serve Halal food but will not advertise this in a bid to attract both Muslim and Sikh customers, and in effect mislead both communities.

Leaving food security to the whims of market forces does not reliably serve people's right to food. Market provision responds to demand and scale, not to rights or obligations. This is incredibly stark when it comes to Kosher access, where the small economy of scale means that Kosher food is far more expensive than alternatives. Many families forgo meat or are forced to change how they observe Kosher laws. One service provider noted how since the cost-of-living crisis, some charities that provide Kosher food to low-income families will now also provide food on Jewish festivals (unlike in the past), reflecting how economic factors and inability to access adequate food directly impact other human rights, such as the right to religion and the right to a family life.

There is limited domestic infrastructure for shechita (Kosher slaughter) in Ireland, with the very small community size in Northern Ireland and the closure of local suppliers meaning that kosher meat has historically been sourced from Great Britain. Following Brexit, additional barriers affecting trade have significantly disrupted supply chains, increasing costs and reducing the availability of kosher food for communities in Ireland and Northern Ireland. A Jewish respondent in Belfast described how Kosher food is imported from England to the Republic of Ireland, then from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland. This added cost makes it completely unaffordable. This small economy of scale means that Kosher food is inaccessible to many Jews in two aspects – geography and class.

### **Impact on communities**

Although no Sikh respondents reflected prejudicial views towards people who keep to a Halal diet, there was a feeling that their dietary and, by extension, communal needs are not taken seriously, in contrast to other groups. This issue comes up again when respondents from a range of faith communities contrast their own difficulties with the experiences of other communities. Furthermore, the one-size-fits-all approach of many service providers effectively excludes groups from taking part in cross-communal activities when they are not physically catered for.

Debates such as the proposed labelling of Halal and Kosher meat illustrate how food access is often framed as a consumer or identity issue, rather than a rights issue. This topic gained wider traction in February 2026 when a Private Members' Bill was introduced to label Kosher and Halal food.

Freedom of religion, as protected under Article 9 of the Human Rights Act, includes both the right to hold beliefs and the right to manifest them, including through dietary practices. While the manifestation of religion is a qualified right, any restrictions must be justified and proportionate, particularly where they may impact a person's ability to access adequate food.

In practice, the availability of Halal, Kosher, and Sikh-appropriate food is shaped not only by legal frameworks but by market dynamics. These factors can make provision uneven, costly, and fragile. In this context, policy interventions, if not carefully designed, can risk exacerbating existing inequalities. In the case of the Private Members Bill in question, its introduction at a time when racism directed at

both Jewish and Muslim communities is commonplace and rising meant it was treated by many in Jewish and Muslim communities with suspicion, and, in some cases, as contributing to the stigmatisation of Jewish and Muslim religious practices.

Attempts to legislate easier access to adequate food for one community at the expense of another community risk denying both the right to religion and the right to food. In essence, because of the non-practice of food as a human right and the reliance on market forces for food provision, communities are ignored and at risk of fracturing. It is in this context that food access can be treated as a zero-sum game.

A rights-based approach offers an alternative framework. Recognising food as a human right - including its requirement of adequacy - allows for the development of systems capable of meeting different, and at times mutually exclusive, dietary needs simultaneously. This avoids positioning communities in competition with one another, and instead grounds provision in principles of dignity, equality, and inclusion.

One stark response we found from a number of faith groups is that, rather than a lack of food security causing distrust between groups, it can highlight and stigmatise economic differences within faith communities. Several respondents reflected tensions within communities, which arise from inadequate food provision. The Jewish community is mostly geographically concentrated in certain English cities, but Jewish respondents from other parts of the UK expressed deeper dissatisfaction with mainstream Jewish communities for being London-centric rather than with local service providers. This is reflected by a wider theme amongst Jewish respondents that public services are trusted far less than local Jewish-focused voluntary initiatives, which will be addressed more thoroughly in the next section.

In addition, stigma over perceived poverty is common amongst communities, but it will have different nuances in each. A Rabbi reflected on the ‘Kippers and Curtains’<sup>2</sup> phenomenon in his congregation, where members will sacrifice nutrition and other essentials in order to maintain an appearance of financial stability to fit in with neighbours. Respondents from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities similarly reflected that they have little knowledge of food needs in their communities, with a possible reason being that those in need try to hide it.

## **Question 2: Experiences of seeking support for food in the UK**

Food is incredibly important in all cultures, and social action around food is a common aspect of many faith communities. Almost all community leaders we spoke to reflected charitable engagements of their faith communities. Nationally, church-based food support is crucial to the food bank system, and in religiously diverse areas, communal food provision has become essential to many local support systems. Many faith representatives emphasised the charitable work they engage in and underlined that sharing food not only for their own communities but also amongst communities was essential.

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<sup>2</sup> A term used to describe households maintaining the outward appearance of financial stability (the “curtains”) while quietly cutting back on essentials such as food (the “kippers”). In this context, members may sacrifice nutrition and other essentials in order to maintain an appearance of financial stability within their community.

Faith communities tend to seek charitable support from within their communities first. This constitutes a ‘hidden support’ whereby informal networks provide food support in a way that public services do not notice, and so cannot readjust to understand the source of need.

For example, within some Jewish communities, it is common practice to provide meals to unwell individuals, those who have recently given birth, or those who are in mourning, while Sikh gurdwaras provide free communal meals (langar) open to all. While these practices are vital sources of support, they are often informal and unrecorded, meaning that the underlying need remains invisible to public systems.

In the recurring issues, which happen in hospitals where religious and medical dietary needs intersect, patients often rely on family and friends to bring in appropriate food for them. Charity frequently fills this gap, too, but this creates unequal access depending on community infrastructure. And in recent years, as charities have been able to provide less due to wider economic conditions, the safety net has been removed for many.

Experiences of seeking food support based on adequacy are strongly shaped by stigma, fear of discrimination, and a fear of being seen as demanding. Across multiple testimonies, people described deliberately limiting their demands or avoiding services altogether.

This dynamic highlights the importance of a right to food framework. Where food provision is understood as charity, individuals may feel shame or reluctance in seeking support. A rights-based approach reframes this relationship, establishing access to adequate food as an entitlement and placing responsibility on duty-bearers to meet that obligation.

One Jewish community representative explained: “I’m cautious about rocking the boat. We don’t want to demand too much.” Others spoke about actively keeping a low profile, particularly in contexts of heightened racism, for fear that raising concerns linked to religious identity could trigger hostility.

Faith organisations frequently provide food support discreetly and with dignity, including communal meals that are not framed as charity. One provider described this as “hidden food support”, precisely because stigma within communities as well as between communities remains so strong. Other initiatives focus on reducing food waste or building food resilience and teaching people how to prepare nutritious meals affordably.

However, these solutions are uneven, precarious, and dependent on voluntary capacity. They mitigate harm but do not replace the need for systemic, rights-based guarantees.

As a result, many people adapt themselves to exclusion rather than expecting systems to adapt to them. This includes accepting nutritionally inadequate food, relying on family or informal networks instead of formal support, self-catering in hospitals or avoiding institutionally provided food entirely.

### **Question 10: What should a right to food law include regarding government duties?**

Our evidence suggests that for a right to food to be meaningful, it must move beyond a lowest-common-denominator approach focused solely on calories or basic nutrition.

A right to food law should include duties to:

- Ensure food adequacy, including cultural and religious appropriateness, across public services such as schools, hospitals, care settings, and asylum accommodation.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all provision, recognising that different communities face different barriers to accessing appropriate food.
- Require training and guidance for those involved in food procurement and catering, so that dietary requirements are understood and implemented accurately, rather than assumed or approximated.
- Consult affected communities directly, rather than relying solely on census or aggregate data, which respondents noted often undercounts or misrepresents smaller communities.
- Provide accountability and routes to redress when food provision repeatedly fails to meet adequacy standards.

Without these duties, there is a risk that a right to food would exist formally while continuing to be inaccessible to those whose needs fall outside dominant norms. We also support the recommendations set out in the submission by Just Fair and the ESCR Network regarding the incorporation of the right to food into domestic law and the establishment of clear, enforceable duties.

## **Conclusion**

The right to food is a fundamental component of any wider human rights framework. In the case of faith-appropriate food, this is an area that is both an economic right and a cultural right as well as being protected by Article 9 of the Human Rights Act – freedom of religion.

Adequacy, dignity, and cultural and religious inclusion are central to the realisation of the right to food. For many faith communities, access to appropriate food is not optional; it is a necessary condition for participation in society, maintaining health, and exercising fundamental rights, including freedom of religion and family life.

At present, gaps in provision are frequently filled by community organisations, faith-based charities, and informal support networks. While these responses are vital, they are not a substitute for a rights-based system. Reliance on charity creates uneven access and leaves individuals dependent on geography, community capacity, and personal networks.

A legal right to food offers the opportunity to move from patchwork provision and a reactive response to consistent and accountable systems which are robust and flexible in their understanding of community needs. Crucially, these must be informed by community members with lived experience of food deprivation. It is, furthermore, not enough to consult with one member of a faith group to interpret a faith-wide food adequacy program. Many faith groups are wide and diverse, and have food practices open to nuance.

Any right to food law, roadmap, or programme must not treat culturally and religiously appropriate food as a “special requirement,” but a core component of adequacy. Failure to recognise this, risks embedding exclusion within otherwise well-intentioned systems.

A right to food that fully incorporates adequacy, participation, and accountability would not only address food insecurity, but would strengthen social cohesion, improve public trust, and ensure that

human rights are realised in practice across the UK. Realising the right to food in full would enable a society in which individuals and communities are able to participate freely and equally, confident that their cultural and religious identities will be recognised and supported. This would not only address material deprivation but would also allow diversity to be expressed and celebrated as a strength of UK society.

**Annex**

To gather the evidence for this submission, René Cassin reached out to service providers and community representatives across the UK and conducted online and over-the-phone semi-structured interviews. Whilst much of the evidence gathering brought up lived experience testimony, we did not consult with individuals who considered themselves to be directly experiencing food deprivation or were vulnerable.