
LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL: HALAL MEAT CONSULTATION 2018

Response from Humanists UK, February 2018

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted by over 65,000 members and supporters to promote humanism. Through our ceremonies, pastoral support, education services, and campaigning work, we advance free thinking and freedom of choice so everyone can live in a fair and equal society.

We have long campaigned for an end to the exemption from the law mandating pre-stunning for animals slaughtered to provide shechita and halal meat. However, if the exemption is not to be brought to an end, then we think at the very least rules should be introduced requiring all such meat to be labeled as such. In 2014, we endorsed the petition organised by British Veterinary Association (BVA) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) calling for the labelling of non-stunned meat. The petition gained over 100,000 signatures and was debated in parliament.

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

Introduction

The county council is considering its current policy for the supply of halal meat to schools. The council currently provides both stunned and unstunned halal meat in a small number of schools, providing this service for school meals where there is the demand for it. The county council is considering the proposal to provide only stunned halal meat to schools. We welcome your views on this proposal.

1. **How strongly do you agree or disagree with the proposal to provide only stunned halal meat to schools?**

Strongly agree

2. **Why do you say this?**

We support the County Council's proposal because non-stunned slaughter causes unnecessary pain and suffering. This view is supported by several animal welfare organisations including the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), the British Veterinary Association (BVA), and even the Government's own Farm Animal Welfare Committee. The RSPCA states that to safeguard farm animal welfare 'it is vital that animals are handled considerately and killed humanely, which includes being stunned effectively so that they remain unconscious and cannot feel pain, before being slaughtered.'¹ In 2015, polling by the BVA revealed that 64% of UK vets believe that welfare at the time

¹ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/farm/slaughter>

of slaughter, specifically a requirement for all animals to be pre-stunned, is a top priority for Government in animal welfare. There is a consensus that non-stunned slaughter is the most significant gap in our animal welfare legislation and needs urgent redress both at local and national level.

3. What impact would this proposal have on you?

Many humanists, and non-religious people more generally, believe that it is a hallmark of a humane society to have compassionate attitudes to animals and so to reduce animal suffering resulting from human behaviour whenever possible. It goes strongly against their beliefs to purchase or consume unstunned meat products, both for themselves and for their children. The current policy of providing both stunned and non-stunned halal meat without information about which is which being readily available to parents and students means often people with a strong objection to non-stunned slaughter are unwittingly exposed to such meat products.

Moreover, the majority of parents pay into a school's budget to provide for school meals. Many non-religious parents will not buy non-stunned meat in butchers shops or supermarkets as it supports a practice that they fundamentally disagree with. This consideration does not change for school meals. Non-religious parents do not wish to support the practice of non-stunned slaughter through their purchase of school meals.

The British Social Attitudes Survey 2016, the most comprehensive survey of religious belonging in Britain, states that 43.2% of the population of the North West of England are non-religious, most of whom would welcome the removal of non-stunned meat from school menus. Those belonging to all non-Christian faiths, including Islam - where there is some but very far from universal demand for non-stunned meat - comprise only 5.6%. Although this rate might be higher in some areas of Lancashire and in some of its schools, overall, the balance must be in favour of removal from school meals of meat from animals slaughtered without stunning.

4. What, if anything, do you think could be done differently in providing halal meat to schools?

Lancashire County Council should end the practice of providing non-stunned meat across its schools. The right of Muslims to express their religious beliefs does not confer an obligation on the County Council to offer non-stunned meat in its schools. The Human Rights Act 1998 guarantees freedom of religion or belief but imposes conditions on the right to manifest one's religious beliefs. Ritual methods of slaughter are certainly a manifestation of religious beliefs but can be restricted both as interfering with the health or morals of a democratic society, and for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others (i.e. those who have an ethical objection to non-stunned meat). Animals are recognised in law as sentient beings with an interest, just as human beings have, in avoiding unnecessary pain and suffering. Therefore, to subject an animal to an extremely painful slaughter process, when this could be avoided by the use of pre-stunning, is cruel and runs counter to our moral standards as a democratic society. Thus, a ban in Lancashire's schools on meat from animals not stunned at slaughter is a legitimate and proportional limitation in accordance with our human rights legislation.

Furthermore, there is no consensus about the necessity of the animal to be conscious during the slaughter process for it to be considered halal. The overwhelming majority of halal meat produced in this country is pre-stunned before slaughter. Lancashire County Council can still supply pre-stunned halal meat after it stops supplying non-stunned meat. This is a reasonable accommodation of Islamic religious beliefs without compromising the welfare of animals, the morals of our society, or the rights and freedoms of others, where the huge majority of the population believe that we have an obligation to reduce pain and suffering to animals.

There is no religious obligation for Muslims to eat non-stunned halal meat, nor a legal obligation upon a school to provide it. Some Muslims consider it against their religious beliefs to eat meat from stunned animals but this does not mean that they have a right to be provided with non-stunned meat. In the same way that if a religious group believed that not eating meat unless it is from cats and dogs is a requirement for its adherents, a school would be under no obligation to provide it, if a school for moral or practical reasons does not provide non-stunned halal meat but does provide an otherwise adequate meal for a child, then it has fulfilled its obligation. Section 114A of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires that food and drink that is provided at schools in England complies with certain nutritional standards, these standards are specified in the School Food Standards Framework 2015 and include a non-dairy source of protein option to be available on three or more days each week. Again, the prohibition on stunned meat can be accommodated by the schools providing non-meat meals and the proposal does not in any way inhibit Muslim parents making alternative arrangements for their children's dietary requirements, such as packed lunches and home meals.

5. Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

By providing non-stunned meat in its schools, Lancashire County Council is arguably acting as an accessory to a breach of the law since the exemption from the requirement for animals to be stunned is explicitly only 'for the food of Jews' or 'for the food of Muslims' (as per Schedule 12 of The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 (SI 731) 1995). Slaughterers slaughtering animals without stunning to provide meat for the Council's schools where some will not be consumed by Jews or Muslims are in breach of the law and the Council is complicit.

6. Are you responding to this consultation as...?

Other: National charity.

For more details, information and evidence, contact Humanists UK:

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