

Success! Lancashire votes to take un-stunned meat off school menus

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The National Secular Society has welcomed a decision from Lancashire County Council to only supply halal meat from animals that have been stunned before slaughter to schools.

The Council voted in favour of the motion to not provide non-poultry meat to schools and other establishments unless the animals were stunned before slaughter, and to consult with the Lancashire Council of Mosques and other concerned parties on how to best implement this policy.

Geoff Driver, the council's leader who called for the [vote](#), said in the [Lancashire Telegraph](#), "This is an animal welfare issue, nothing more nothing less.

"The reason it has been raised now is because the contract for meat supplies is coming up for renewal.

Cllr Driver added: "In my view, with modern methods of reversible stunning, there is no need for animals to suffer during slaughter.

"This view is actually shared by the vast majority of Muslims in this country where 84% of halal meat comes from animals that were stunned before they were slaughtered."

Animal welfare legislation requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise suffering. The only exemption is for religious communities to meet Jewish and Muslim religious dietary preferences. Under UK law, meat from animals killed under the exemption is only supposed to be for the consumption of Muslims and Jews.

Unstunned halal meat is supplied to 12,000 pupils at 27 schools in Blackburn, Nelson, Burnley, Rawtenstall, Hyndburn, Clitheroe and Preston.

The decision to end the policy of supplying non-stunned halal meat to schools across the County has been welcomed by the National Secular Society.

Stephen Evans, NSS campaigns director, commented: "The practice of imposing un-stunned meat from religious slaughter methods on pupils, public service users and the general populace is completely unacceptable, and needs to end. We commend Lancashire on its decision.

"As long as religious groups are granted an exemption from legislation aimed at ensuring animals do not suffer avoidable distress or pain, the number of animals killed under the exemption should be kept to an absolute minimum – and consumers must be able to avoid such products.

"A majority of Muslims accept pre-stunning and we would urge all schools and local authorities to resist being bullied into unethical and regressive policy decisions by fundamentalist faith leaders claiming to speak on behalf of all Muslims.

"The time has come to abolish the religious exemption that allows animals to be slaughtered without pre-stunning. Religious freedom should be supported, but this is not an absolute right.

Exemptions should not be made on religious grounds to animal welfare regulations intended to ensure that farm animals are slaughtered under the most humane conditions possible."

The decision to even hold the vote prompted criticism from the Lancashire Council of Mosques (LCM). Abdul Qureshi, LCM's chair, said a decision to stop supplying unstunned meat would "create a huge difficulty".

"People will pull out of school meals and people who should eat properly will be deprived of that," said Mr Qureshi. "For us it's a matter of faith. For Geoff Driver it is his feelings."

In 2012 the council briefly [stopped serving](#) meat which had not been stunned in its schools after it changed supplier. On that occasion LCM asked all Muslim families to boycott Lancashire school meals completely, not only those affected by the ban of halal un-stunned meat.

Although LCM insists on its [website](#) that "the slaughter process must avoid all forms of stunning" in order for meat to be considered halal, the majority of halal meat sold in the UK is from animals stunned before slaughter.

There are numerous councils in the UK that do not provide any halal meat at all for school meals, and some that will only supply stunned halal meat. For example, Aberdeen City Council states:

"Our suppliers take animal welfare very seriously. All farmed animals which are slaughtered for their products are done so humanely, in accordance with EU and UK law. This includes provision to ensure that animals are rendered insensible to pain, distress or suffering, prior to killing and includes the stunning of animals prior to slaughter. Traditional Halal slaughter, which forbids the stunning of animals, is a practice which is not accepted by our suppliers on animal welfare grounds."

However, NSS research indicates that the situation at Lancashire County Council was not unique. Bradford Metropolitan Council's halal meat contract specification "...is for no-pre stunned halal meat and halal poultry. Pre stunned is not acceptable to either the Bradford Council for Mosques or to HMC (Halal Monitoring Committee)."

Halal meat supplied through Leeds City Council is also accredited with HMC, meaning that it cannot be stunned before slaughter.

The NSS is [campaigning](#) for an end to religious exemptions to animal welfare laws, amid concern that the non-stun slaughter industry is growing. Leading vets are among those who [say](#) slitting animals' throats and allowing them to bleed to death without prior stunning for halal and kosher meat causes unnecessary suffering. Significant meat producing countries such as Denmark and New Zealand legally mandate pre-stunning even for Halal slaughter.

The NSS has written to Environment Secretary Michael Gove urging him to remove the religious exemption from animal welfare legislation. [New data from the Food Standards Agency](#) recently revealed a sharp rise in the number of animals slaughtered without pre-stunning in the UK.

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