

Shechita UK

Mr Alun Jones AM
The National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA
26th November 2014

Dear Mr Jones,

Shechita UK speaks for the Jewish Community on matters relating to the protection of the provision of kosher meat in the UK, and seeks to raise awareness of the Jewish religious humane method of animal slaughter for food, shechita.

We therefore noted with interest the recent meeting of the Environment and Sustainability Committee of the Welsh Assembly at which discussions focused in part on religious slaughter.

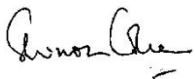
Following the committee meeting, members of the Jewish community were disappointed and concerned that a discussion of this nature had taken place without representatives of religious communities present. Members had the opportunity to hear from both the BVA and the RSPCA but did not have the opportunity to hear a response from either the Jewish or the Muslim community.

We would be very keen to make a presentation to the committee and the next available opportunity and wonder whether that might possible at some point next year?

In the meantime, I have enclosed a short briefing from Shechita UK on the subject and I wonder if you would be good enough to circulate it to members of the committee for their reference. If we can provide any further information to you or any other interested member of the committee we would be delighted to meet to offer a full briefing at your convenience.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Shimon Cohen
Campaign Director

PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

What is Shechita?

Shechita is the Jewish religious humane method of animal slaughter for food. It is the only method of preparing meat and poultry in accordance with Jewish tradition.

Shechita is performed by a highly trained 'Shochet' and is a very swift and efficient procedure. The 'chalaf' (the surgically sharp instrument used) incises the structures at the neck of an animal. Blood supply to the brain ceases immediately, all consciousness is irreversibly lost and with it, the ability to feel pain. It is quick, effective, safe and it ensures that the animal is not subject to any avoidable pain.

What is the difference between Shechita and conventional mechanical slaughter?

Conventional mechanical slaughter uses industrial methods which would simply not be permitted for Shechita. In conventional mechanical slaughter a high throughput of animals must be maintained for commercial reasons and this creates many animal welfare issues, such as where lairage workers use electric prods or push and kick the cattle in order to usher them more quickly along the production line.

However, the main difference between Shechita and conventional mechanical slaughter is in the way that the animals are stunned.

Shechita conforms with the EU Definition of stunning - '*any intentionally induced process which causes loss of consciousness and sensibility without pain, including any process resulting in instantaneous death,*' - by causing immediate cerebral perfusion - whereas mechanical methods may include captive bolt shooting, gassing and electrocution by by tongs or water. These methods frequently go wrong (see European Food Safety Authority figures below) leaving the animal in great, prolonged distress.

Many people are unaware that these methods were originally conceived by large scale factory abattoirs to speed up the process and stop the animal thrashing around at the point of slaughter so that the production line could be moved on more quickly. It was latterly adopted by animal welfare organisations and considered a tool for raising levels of animal welfare. However, the evidence in support of the animal welfare benefits is inconclusive and failure rates considered by many to be unacceptably high.

What are the animal welfare benefits of the Shechita Method?

By contrast, the Shechita process has to be slow and methodical. Any animal or bird which is even slightly harmed prior to slaughter is not considered suitable for kosher consumption. Therefore special care is taken to ensure that the animals are extremely well treated and calm ahead of slaughter, not only because it is mandated by Jewish law but also because any other approach would make kosher meat production near impossible.

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What does the science say?

Many academics believe (See Regenstein, Grandin) that Shechita is at least as humane as other methods if not preferable, for the animal welfare benefits outlined above - while others believe that conventional mechanical slaughter is preferable. Most agree that making any assessment of the pain felt by an animal is incredibly difficult. As a result, the Government's position has always been that the scientific evidence in this area is inconclusive. No study has ever replicated Shechita in a laboratory environment and therefore no accurate scientific assessment of Shechita has ever been carried out.

The All Party Group on Beef and Lamb, based at Westminster concluded in recent report that "there is research and further analysis to be undertaken on the measurement of pain in animals at the time of slaughter."

What is the Jewish community's view on labelling?

The Jewish community is not against food labelling. In fact we invented it (the Hechsher) in order to identify food which is appropriate for kosher consumption. We are also fully supportive of calls for the labelling of the amount of meat, slaughtered according to the Shechita method, which finds its way into the mainstream market.

However if there is going to be labelling according to provenance of food, it must be comprehensive and even handed.

It seems incongruous to us to pre-suppose that consumers do not have a right to know that an animal has been slaughtered by mechanical methods or mechanically stunned prior to slaughter by one of the legal methods that include captive bolt shooting, gassing, electrocution, drowning, trapping, clubbing or any of the other approved methods, nor would it include incidences of mis-stunning, which by law are all recorded in slaughterhouses.

Labelling a meat product "not stunned before slaughter" suggests that no stun takes place at all, when Shechita in fact incorporates an effective stun at slaughter. One dimensional labelling such as this is pejorative and discriminatory, effectively placing religious slaughter methods in a second class category. We call upon all those concerned with animal welfare and with consumer rights to join us in calling for truly comprehensive food labelling.

Some numbers regarding mis-stunning:

Data on mis-stuns is difficult to come by but The European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) report on the "Welfare Aspects of Animal Stunning and Killing Methods (2004)" found that the failure rate for penetrating captive bolt stunning in conventional mechanical slaughter of cattle may be as high as 6.6% and that for non-penetrating captive bolt stunning and electric stunning this can rise to as high as 31%. A 2013 "Study on the Various Methods of Stunning for Poultry" stated that the percentages for poultry would be at 4%.

These studies are both Europe wide and somewhat outdated, one might prefer to rely instead on anecdotal reports from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural

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Affairs which suggest that current UK standards and improved stunning techniques mean that mis-stuns may now be at 1% across the board.

In the UK that would equate to 26,000 cattle mis-stunned, 100,000 pigs mis-stunned and 9.5 million poultry mis-stunned. The total quantity of cattle slaughtered for the Jewish community is around 20,000 with community slaughtering around 1 million chickens. We frequently ask animal welfare organisations why they are so much more focused on the tiny number of animals slaughtered for the kosher market rather than on the millions of animals who are mis-stunned every year – we are yet to receive a response.

Recently FSA statistics on mis-stuns were released following a parliamentary question on the topic. They showed that an unrealistically low number of mis-stuns had been recorded in the UK. For example in 2011, only 6 cattle were officially reported as having been mis-stunned. Following a series of follow up parliamentary questions, George Eustice MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Farming, has now conceded that these statistics may not be complete and that they may only represent a fraction of the actual number and the FSA will endeavour to improve its reporting methods in the future.

A note on terminology:

Please note that we are careful never to refer to '*ritual slaughter*' – there is no ritual involved in Shechita and it is a term used by opponents to portray it as some sort of medieval or barbaric practice. We instead simply use the word Shechita or 'religious slaughter'. We would very much appreciate if parliamentarians would help us by using these terms.

For more information on this topic please contact:

Shimon Cohen

020 7284 6947 or
07836 728790

scohen@theproffice.com

Mark Frazer

020 7284 6961 or
07876 402678

mfrazer@theproffice.com