

Council welcomes court ruling following E. coli outbreak case

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Belfast City Council has welcomed sentencing in the case against Moviehouse Cinemas (Yorkgate) Ltd following the largest ever E. coli O157 outbreak in Northern Ireland.

The judge imposed a fine of £110,000 – the largest fine in any case of its kind in Northern Ireland - on the owners of the Flicks restaurant in north Belfast.

The outbreaks in August and October 2012 were linked to the restaurant. There were 141 clinically confirmed cases of E.coli; 19 of whom were admitted to hospital and a further 159 people presented symptoms.

The restaurant closed voluntarily on October 11, 2012, following advice from the council's Environmental Health staff.

In his judgement, Judge Kerr said the owners were “highly culpable” and that despite inspections carried out by council staff and advice being given, restaurant management had failed to adequately address the issues.

A council spokesperson said: “This concludes a complex investigation by council staff and highlights the importance of good food safety management, and the dangerous consequences when there are failures.

“We welcome the significant fine imposed which reflects the seriousness of this case. E.Coli is highly infectious and can prove deadly so it is extremely fortunate that no lives were lost following this outbreak – the largest ever in Northern Ireland.

“The council would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the late Dr Louise Fielding and Mr Gordon Hayburn both of whom provided expert evidence which has been crucial to the prosecution case.”

The judge acknowledged that the owner had entered a guilty plea at the first opportunity and had cooperated fully with the investigation.

The owners had previously pleaded guilty to 11 separate food hygiene offences at Belfast Crown Court.

The bill of indictment cited 11 separate breaches of food hygiene legislation including:

- failure to ensure that food handlers were supervised and instructed, and/or trained in food

hygiene matters;

- failure to ensure that employees had adequate training in the application of the hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP) principles;
- failure to put in place and maintain procedures based on the HACCP principles;
- failure to ensure that cooked and ready-to-eat food was protected at all stages of production, processing and distribution against contamination with E.coli 0157;
- failure to ensure there were materials for cleaning and/or drying of hands in the staff WC; wash hand basin in the service area; and in the kitchen preparation area;
- failure to ensure that staff toilets were kept clean;
- keeping food, namely parsley, at a temperature above 8 degrees centigrade which was likely to support the growth of pathogenic micro-organisms or the formulation of toxins.