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Northern Irish Traveller family unlawfully discriminated against at Belfast restaurant

A court has ruled that an Irish Traveller family asked to leave a Belfast restaurant was unlawfully discriminated against on grounds of race.

The case was brought by the Joyce family and was supported by the Equality Commission.

On October 1, 2022, Patrick Joyce, his wife and two adult children went to the Cuisine Buffet Ltd, York Street, Belfast. After taking their seats, the family was told to leave the restaurant.

Restaurant staff accepted that the Joyce family had not caused any disturbance or issue, but said the family were asked to leave because of alleged previous incidents with members of the Travelling community.

The family could see no reason why they were asked to leave other than the fact that they are Irish Travellers.

Mr Joyce said that his family were left very upset and embarrassed by what had happened.

“We were looking forward to our first dinner as a family, after a very difficult time for us following the death of two of my sons, instead we were made to leave the restaurant. We tried to reason with the manager, but it was very clear to us that Travellers were not welcome. My late mother Nan fought for years to improve rights for Travellers, but sadly, being treated like second class citizens is not a new experience for us. We just want it to stop.”

Cuisine Buffet Ltd did not defend the case in court and was ordered to pay compensation of £5,000 to each of the Joyce family members.

Speaking after the case, Head of Legal Services at the Equality Commission, Eoin O'Neill, said the ruling was a reminder that discrimination based on a person's racial background is unacceptable and unlawful.

“What happened to the Joyce family was distressing and humiliating and, as importantly, it is against the law. Irish Travellers are protected by the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997.

“The Court found that the Joyce family were victims of discrimination because of their race. The restaurant’s refusal to allow them to remain in the establishment re-enforces racial stereotypes. It is important that this prejudice was challenged through our legal system,” Eoin said.