



Traveller parents settle case against Mid Ulster District Council



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Race discrimination case supported by the Equality Commission

Caroline Joyce and Noel Cawley have settled their race discrimination case against Mid Ulster District Council for £15,000. The case was supported by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

The parents, who are members of the Traveller community, attended an appointment to register the birth of their new baby at a council office in May 2024. When asked if their paperwork was complete, they explained they required assistance to fill in the form. The parents had very little formal schooling and find it difficult to read and write. Mr Cawley also has dyslexia.

The parents said a Deputy Registrar assigned to assist them, advised that they didn't help anyone to fill out paperwork and wouldn't be helping them. They believed this employee's attitude towards them changed after hearing their accents.

They said they were given a few minutes to complete the form, or their appointment would be cancelled. Noel tried unsuccessfully to use an app on his phone to help them. The parents said they were then 'shooed' out of the office.

Staff working at reception agreed to help them complete the form, but the parents say they were instructed not to so by a Deputy Registrar, and they were asked to leave.

After failing to register the birth they left the council offices upset. However, they had to return as Noel had left his phone behind.

When they returned, a manager asked what had happened. The parents shared their experience and said they were treated that way was because they were Travellers. This manager filled in a complaints form.

The next day they were contacted by the council and offered an appointment at a different council office. Caroline and Noel were accompanied by an employee of the South Tyrone Empowerment Programme. On this occasion their daughter's birth was registered without incident.

The Council wrote to them upholding their complaint regarding their failure to access registration services, the staff member's treatment and conduct towards members of the public and poor customer service but made no mention of unlawful discrimination.

Caroline Joyce said: "We had to take a stand, how we were treated was just awful. We only went there to register our new baby. We thought our baby had to be registered to get medical treatment and were so worried that this would cause problems for the baby. We were made to feel like our family were second class citizens, that we weren't good enough."

Mary Kitson, Senior Legal Officer, Equality Commission for Northern Ireland said: "This was a particularly distressing experience for Caroline and Noel. Registering a baby's birth is a legal requirement. They should have received the assistance they required to do this.

"Employers must ensure their staff know it is unlawful to refuse or provide a less favourable service to someone because of their race.

"We must robustly challenge racial prejudice and all discrimination where it occurs. When anyone makes a complaint to a service user of unlawful discrimination it must be thoroughly investigated and action taken to ensure that it does not happen again", concluded Ms Kitson.

In settling the case Mid Ulster District Council affirmed its commitment to the principle of equality in accessing goods, facilities, and services. The council is working with the Equality Commission in relation to its policies, practices, procedures, and staff training. Having apologised to the customers at the time and after their complaint, the Council regrets that because of the service offered the parents were distressed and felt it necessary to bring the claims. The case was settled without admission of liability.

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