



Newham Council in court over teenager's fireball horror

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A London borough council has been sentenced for a serious safety breach after a 15 year-old girl was engulfed in a fireball from a cooking stove during a school camping expedition.

The teenager, then a pupil at East Ham's Plashet School, was caught in a flashover when another girl poured methylated spirits on to the cooking stove as she believed it was going out.

The erupting flames set fire to the girl's clothing and headscarf. She suffered severe burns to her hands, arms, face, neck and legs and was in Chelmsford Hospital's Special Burns Unit for three weeks. She has since had to have a skin graft and has permanent scarring.

The teenager, who has asked not to be named, was one of 25 girls on a three-day Duke of Edinburgh's Silver Award camping trip near the West Sussex village of Henfield. The incident, on 9 July 2011, was investigated by the Health and Safety Executive, which brought a prosecution against Newham Council for safety failings.

Southwark Crown Court was told today (25 Jan) that HSE found the incident could have been avoided if basic precautions had been taken. Fuel should have been kept in the correct containers, safely stored and simple procedures followed for lighting the stove.

The Duke of Edinburgh camping group was led by an expedition leader employed by the Council along with two teachers and a school administrator.

The court heard the group was enjoying the second night at the camp and some were cooking food for the evening meal. One of the girls wanted to cook some more food but thought the stove was going out. She picked up a five-litre container of methylated spirits and poured some into the stove causing the instant flashover.

The expedition leader ran to the burning teenager and rolled her back and forth on the ground while shouting for others to bring water and call 999. At the same time, he was beating her

trousers with his hands to try to put out the flames. He saw the girl's headscarf on fire and quickly removed it while a man from another group poured water over her face. They continued to douse her with water until paramedics arrived minutes later.

Newham Borough Council, of Dockside Road, London E16, pleaded guilty to a breach of Section 3(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. It was fined £15,000 and ordered to pay £17,246 in costs.

After the hearing, HSE inspector John Crookes said:

"This incident was avoidable and the failure to take simple safety measures has led to a young girl being unnecessarily scarred for life.

"Councils, schools and voluntary groups that organise camping trips involving the use of highly flammable stove fuel must ensure they implement effective precautions to prevent the ignition of fuel or vapour.

"A five-litre container of methylated spirits should never have been used to fill a camping stove. Any fuel needed for the trip should have been taken in containers incorporating a safety cut-off valve and kept away from ignition sources. There also should have been a better procedure to follow when filling or refilling the stove.

"This is not about stopping school trips or burdening staff with excessive paperwork. It is about identifying simple precautions and ensuring they are in place."

For advice on safety in education, visit <http://www.hse.gov.uk/services/education>^[1]

Notes to editors

1. The Health and Safety Executive is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. It aims to reduce work-related death, injury and ill health. It does so through research, information and advice; promoting training; new or revised regulations and codes of practice; and working with local authority partners by inspection, investigation and enforcement. www.hse.gov.uk^[2]
2. Section 3(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 states: "It shall be the duty of every employer to conduct his undertaking in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in his employment who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their health or safety."
3. HSE news releases are available at www.hse.gov.uk/press^[3].