

Norfolk town plagued by abattoir stench

A Norfolk community largely prevented from leaving their homes in the first coronavirus lockdown in 2020 had to endure the stench from decaying poultry at an abattoir.

Residents described the putrid smell as like 'rotting bodies and flesh'. Another was physically sick.

A court heard the Environment Agency received nearly 350 complaints from local people and businesses in the area surrounding the site in Attleborough between 2019 and 2021.

Animal blood was allowed to flood the slaughterhouse floor

Owner Banham Poultry (2018) Ltd has been fined £300,000 for failing to stop odour pollution from the slaughterhouse affecting the lives of people living and working in the market town.

Dirty water from where chickens were washed sat unhygienically on the floor of the Banham Poultry abattoir

District judge Andrew King heard the abattoir had broken or damaged doors and walls, a roof so weak it collapsed, and another part of the site unsafe for Environment Agency staff to enter. He acknowledged practices at Banham Poultry had a 'significant effect on quality of life' in the town.

Odours from the abattoir were allowed to escape into the community through damaged walls like this one

People couldn't enjoy their gardens, and nauseating smells entering their homes were difficult to remove.

Poultry was brought into the abattoir alive and prepared to be later sold in shops and restaurants.

Banham, now under new management from the time of the offending, had a permit from the Environment Agency to slaughter up to 67 million birds a year, more than a million every week.

Streets and houses were overpowered by a constant whiff from the abattoir as the stay-at-home pandemic laws had unintended consequences. But the repulsive smells around Attleborough began more than a year before lockdown.

The Environment Agency warned the company to act after 9 complaints about the slaughterhouse were made early in 2019, coinciding with waste blood kept on site too long.

Believing the company had breached its permit for managing smells, investigators gave Banham Poultry an enforcement notice to limit or prevent odours leaving the boundary of the abattoir.

Sophie Cousins, who led the investigation into the abattoir for the Environment Agency, said:

Banham Poultry failed to invest in odour-prevention. People living and working nearby were badly affected over a long period of time.

The Environment Agency decided on prosecution after Banham missed many chances to comply with the law. We gave them time and assistance to put matters right, but the problems just mounted up.

The site's odour management plan, meant to control the effect of work on the community, was 'ripped up', according to one employee. Another member of staff wrote in an e-mail in 2019 they were 'embarrassed...' and couldn't defend the company's poor management of the site, adding 'we stink'.

The Environment Agency consistently told Banham the plan either didn't contain the necessary measures to prevent odour pollution, or procedures weren't being followed. Banham either responded to the warnings very late or simply ignored them.

District judge King also said in court:

The Environment Agency was seeking to work with Banham Poultry... far and beyond what was required of them as a regulator. Investigators sought to solve problems, providing training to various levels of management, seemingly to no avail.

Investigators went out of their way to make sure Banham followed the right procedures, for example, creating a spreadsheet detailing what needed to be done, but when the complaints kept coming in, legal action was the only outcome.

The court heard foul-smelling air escaped through damaged and open doors. Watery blood from poultry collected on the abattoir floor, prevented from draining away because of blocked drains.

Other parts of the building were badly corroded and beyond repair. Part of the site collapsed in May 2020 when the roof caved in. Structural weaknesses saw another roof blow off in a storm. Repairs that were done were said to be 'shabby'.

Finding decaying animal parts, investigators were also concerned at poor housekeeping, and no contingency plan when animal blood and waste was on site too long.

The shortcomings were made worse by carcasses stored outside in the hot summer of 2020. Dead animals were kept in a trailer in sweltering conditions with no refrigeration.

Staff lacked the relevant training in environmental issues, so were unable to deal with the abattoir's many problems, described by the agency as 'chronic'.

The Environment Agency recorded odours 86 times outside the abattoir from the start of 2019 to September last year, ranging from faint to very strong – all of which came from the abattoir.

People living in Station Road, Maurice Gaymer Road and New North Road were particularly worst hit by the stench of animal carcasses, blood and offal, but businesses were affected, too.

Staff and customers at local firms like a food manufacturer and a tyre repair centre had to put up with the consequence of Banham's poor management.

The company pleaded guilty to failing to keep activities free from odour levels likely to cause pollution outside the abattoir between January 2019 and September 2021.

Banham also admitted not complying with an enforcement notice served on it by the Environment Agency that set out steps they should have taken to limit or prevent odours leaving the site.

District judge King ruled the offences as reckless culpability. He fined Banham Poultry (2018) Ltd, of Station Road, Attleborough, £300,000 for breaching regulation 38 (2) of the Environmental Permitting Regulations 2016. He imposed no separate penalty for a breach of regulation 38 (3) – not complying with the enforcement notice.

The hearing at Chelmsford magistrates' court on 15 September 2022 also ordered Banham Poultry to pay £67,621.45 in costs and a victim surcharge of £170.