

PRESS RELEASE

19th November 2003

Guilty but alive

An Ashton tenant's disastrous attempts at DIY literally brought the house down.

Kenneth Wharton of Hope Street in Ashton-under-Lyne had decided to make some internal alterations to his home. He didn't bother to seek the advice or approval of his landlord, New Charter, and his bungled attempt could have resulted in death.

Tameside Magistrates were told that Wharton removed the load bearing wall in his downstairs flat, causing the collapse of the flat above. Initially, he told New Charter he had heard creaking noises from the walls before escaping the devastation. Staff had immediately provided him with cash and rehoused him before a site investigation revealed the truth.

Wharton denied the charge of criminal damage, and tried to get local newspapers to campaign against New Charter's reluctance to immediately rebuild the flats before evidence was gathered.

Tameside Magistrates sitting on 17th and 18th November found Wharton guilty of the charge of criminal damage and adjourned the case for pre-sentence reports. Magistrates left all options open - which means he could be imprisoned in the New Year.

Steve Hodson, Head of Neighbourhood at New Charter, said, "Mr Wharton was lucky to get out alive. But his damage to these two homes has cost our tenants over £15,000 in rebuilding costs as well as the lost rent for over 18 months. We will not stand for damage to our property. Customers must seek professional advice and our consent before they make home improvements".

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. New Charter formed in 1999 as the new landlords to own and manage nearly 16,400 properties transferred from Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council in Greater Manchester. With a turnover of £49million a year and a workforce of almost 800, New Charter is one of the twenty largest Registered Social Landlords (RSL's), and is regulated by The Housing Corporation, a Government watchdog.
2. The property collapse of 71 and 72 Hope Street occurred on the morning of Thursday 28th February 2002. The upstairs flat was not occupied at the time.
3. Despite our early efforts to help Mr Wharton, he subsequently threatened staff and wrote threatening letters to employees. This resulted in his licence to enter New Charter's offices and shops being revoked at a Court hearing in early April 2002.
4. Rebuilding work is almost complete.

5. The Magistrates Court heard evidence presented by Kevin Corcadden, the Crown Prosecution Service solicitor before finding Wharton guilty. Mr Wharton was represented in Court by Mr Karibo Lawson of Beevers solicitors.
6. The Court has authority to pass a sentence of imprisonment not exceeding 6 months. It has reserved the opportunity of referring the case to a higher court to consider a longer custodial sentence.

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