

Lincs man guilty of exposing public to asbestos gets prison term

A court heard that between 2017 and 2019, Lee Charles of Caldicot Gardens acted as a de facto director of Lincs Demolition Ltd in securing lucrative jobs. He was able to do so by marketing himself as a registered asbestos-removal specialist.

Charles operated his deception in 43 towns and cities across England. A full list can be found under additional information below.

When disturbed, asbestos is a hazardous substance and carcinogenic, something Charles knew, but he also claimed to be registered with the Environment Agency. He was neither a specialist or registered.

The use of asbestos in the UK was subject to an outright ban in 1999, after certain types became outlawed in the 1980s.

Lincoln crown court was told Charles pleaded guilty to lying to customers and giving false paperwork to disguise his deception.

Having duped his customers, waste asbestos was stashed in hired storage containers in Welbourn, Lincolnshire, just 200 metres from a school and close to a Girl Guide centre.

Charles told the owners of the storage space that he wanted to keep tools there. When he failed to pay the rent on the containers, the owners forced the locks and were confronted with the dangerous contents.

Once exposed, Charles, 40, abandoned the storage containers at Welbourn, moving his activities to an unpermitted waste site in Little Hale, near Sleaford. He continued to store asbestos unsafely, posing a risk to public health.

Imposing a 12-month prison sentence, recorder Paul Mann told Charles, who has a string of previous convictions that he “knew the regulatory regime well enough to know what he was doing was seriously wrong.”

However, he said that he was “just” able to suspend the sentence for a period of 2 years so that Charles could pay the Environment Agency’s costs. Charles will also be required to pay compensation to the owners of the Welbourn containers for the not insignificant costs they had incurred in cleaning up the site.

Charles was told that he must return to Lincoln crown court in June for consideration of financial orders, including the potential confiscation of his proceeds of crime.

Paul Salter, waste crime officer for the Environment Agency in Lincolnshire, said:

Lee Charles' crimes were not just illegal, but dangerous.

In spite of repeated warnings and advice from the Environment Agency, Lincs Demolition, under Charles' direction, put both the environment and public health at risk.

Asbestos when inhaled causes serious health problems, the careless storage of which presents a significant hazard, with a risk to the life.

Taking Charles' avoidance of costs into consideration, from appropriate staff training to safe storage, Lincs Demolition avoided business costs of at least £50,000.

It is imperative that all waste businesses have the correct permits in place to protect themselves, the environment and the public. We support businesses trying to do the right thing, only issuing enforcement notices, and penalising businesses as a last resort.

In 2015, illegal waste activity was estimated to cost over £600 million in England alone, with the figure for the UK likely to be much higher.

The Environment Agency's permitting and licensing system enables businesses to carry out their operations, while robust regulation provides the level playing field legitimate businesses need to prevent being undercut by irresponsible or illegal operators.

Charles pleaded guilty to 2 counts of operating a waste operation without a permit, contrary to Regulations 12, 38(1)(a) and 41(1)(a) of the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016.

He also pleaded guilty to 2 counts of keeping or disposing of controlled waste in a manner likely to cause pollution or harm, contrary to Sections 33(1)(c), 33(6) and 157(1) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990.

A date in June will be fixed for the court to decide costs against Charles in favour of the Environment Agency and the proceeds of crime order.

Additional information

- Abingdon
- Barton-upon-Humber
- Boston
- Burntwood
- Cambridge
- Caterham
- Doncaster
- Dorking
- Erdington
- Birmingham
- Grantham *Gravesend
- Great Yarmouth

- Huntingdon
- Ipswich
- Kettering
- Kings Lynn
- Leicester
- Lincoln
- Loughborough
- Luton
- Mansfield
- Market Rasen
- Melton Mowbray
- Newar
- Norwich
- Nottingham
- Oakham
- Peterborough
- Scunthorpe
- Sidcup
- London
- Sleaford
- Spalding
- St Ives, Cambridgeshire
- Stockport
- Wythenshawe
- Greater Manchester
- Stourbridge
- Walsall
- Warsop
- Wellingborough
- Worksop.