

When can I be held liable for someone hurt while using the steps of my building?

In this case the court had to consider the delictual liability of a landlord towards the lessee for an injury the lessee sustained when falling down a flight of stairs on the landlord's premises.

The lessee, Mr Swinburne, and his wife returned home after visiting friends for the day. They lived in a block of flats belonging to Newbee Investments. It had rained heavily for 3 days prior to the incident. There were stairs leading up to the apartments from the parking area and these were the most convenient route to gain access to the apartments. Mrs Swinburne climbed the stairs first and Mr Swinburne followed. The stairs were made out of concrete and had stones laid into the concrete. A pile of sand had gathered on the top stair due to the rain and Mr Swinburne stepped on the pile of sand, lost his balance and fell to the ground. He broke his leg.

The question that the court had to consider was whether or not negligence of the Newbee Investments' had led to Mr Swinburne's fall and his injury. The main argument was that there was a duty of care on Newbee Investments to put a handrail up next to the stairs. The court held that if the handrail had indeed been erected, Mr Swinburne would have been able to steady himself and would most likely not have fallen as he did. The question was thus if Newbee Investments had a duty towards the users of the stairs to protect them against injuries.

The court found that there was indeed a duty of care on Newbee Investments to ensure that the stairs were safe to use.

The court then had to rule on whether or not Newbee Investments had been negligent by not ensuring that the stairs were safe to use. The test applied here was that of the reasonable person. Would the reasonable person in Newbee Investments' shoes have foreseen the possibility of somebody being injured on the stairs and would they have taken reasonable steps to prevent the injury. The court found that Newbee Investments had been indeed negligent.

The opposing side argued that the residents were not obliged to use that staircase and could easily make use of another staircase. The Judge ruled that it was the quickest and most convenient route and the residents were thus entitled to use the stairs. The opposing side then argued that Mr Newbee should have foreseen that the stairs were dangerous due to the rain. The court ruled that Mr Newbee had used the stairs earlier that same day and his wife had successfully climbed them just before him, the opposing sides' argument thus did not hold water.

Newbee Investments furthermore attempted to rely on two clauses in the rent agreement but the court held that the first clause related to the maintenance of the building. The second clause fell under a general clause, and no reasonable person would have interpreted it to mean that Newbee Investments was not going to be liable for personal injuries.

Newbee Investments were thus found to be liable and had to compensate Mr Swinburne for his medical expenses and pay his legal costs.

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