

# Hoarding Policy

## 1 Purpose

This policy and the accompanying procedure set out our approach to hoarding and provides clear good practice guidelines for colleagues on how to manage cases where customers hoard in our properties and services. Metropolitan Thames Valley Housing (MTVH) recognises the effect that hoarding has on the quality of life, health and wellbeing of our customers.

Working with customers who hoard can be very challenging, as there is the need to balance the rights of our customers with our duty to address issues which may be causing a health or safety risk to the customer, other customers and our colleagues. We will work with our customers and collaboratively with partner agencies, using a combination of support and enforcement measures to achieve the best outcomes for all parties.

## 2 Scope

The policy and accompanying procedures apply to:

- Customers who live in accommodation owned or managed by us and who we provide services to

### Our Approach

When our customers are hoarding in their properties, this can cause difficulties for us and the customers, such as:

- Prevention of carrying out essential repairs, inspections and servicing due to property being unsafe/inaccessible or access denied
- Fire risk due to storage of flammable and/or combustible material
- Infection risk caused by rotting materials or infestation
- Condensation problems due to build-up of belongings around walls
- Damage to property
- Complaints from other customers due to the impact upon their safety and well-being

We are committed to working with customers who are hoarding and we will work in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations to provide advice and support to customers affected by hoarding. We will ensure referrals are made to appropriate agencies to provide support for the customer. We will, where appropriate, take enforcement action in connection with any breach of the tenancy agreement. In any enforcement action, the vulnerability of the customer will be taken into consideration.

### 3.1 Definitions

Hoarding behaviour is a recognised mental disorder. A Hoarding Disorder is defined as “persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value” (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This difficulty is due to a perceived need to save the items and to the distress associated with discarding them. The difficulty discarding possessions may result in the accumulation of possessions that may congest and clutter active living areas and substantially compromises their intended use.

A hoarding disorder is characterised by accumulation of possessions that results in living spaces becoming cluttered to the point that their use or safety is compromised. Accumulation occurs due to both repetitive urges or behaviours related to amassing items and difficulty discarding possessions due to a perceived need to save items and distress associated with discarding them. The symptoms result in significant distress or significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning.

There are several different types of hoarding behaviours: animal hoarding, compulsive shopping, food hoarding, information hoarding and rubbish hoarding.

### **Animal Hoarding**

When someone's love for animals causes them to take on more pets than they can reasonably care for, there can be serious health risks and legal issues. Feeding and tending to all those animals' needs can be expensive, and not keeping up with it can result with pets becoming ill. The high volume of pets can also cause damage to the home.

### **Compulsive Shoppers**

For some, shopping can be a fun recreational activity, but for compulsive shoppers it can be a dangerously uncontrollable habit. A shopping addiction can lead to debt and other financial trouble. Even those who limit themselves to bargain hunting can run into trouble by impulse-buying things they do not need and do not have space for within their homes.

### **Food Hoarding**

An obsession for storing food could be a coping mechanism as a result of trauma, or a desire to not be wasteful. However, the urge to collect food for survival can extend far beyond what is healthy. Hoarding food, especially when expired, can attract rodents and insects, causing infestation.

### **Information Hoarding**

An obsession for hoarding information could include collecting any material where information can be found. This can be in the form of books, pamphlets, old receipts or tax returns, recipes, business cards, magazines/newspapers or even video tapes. The information will usually be kept without ever being referred to again. Unfortunately, the extreme clutter caused by the large stacks of paper can be a fire hazard.

### **Rubbish Hoarding**

Sylogomania, more commonly known as rubbish hoarding, is a condition that causes people to stash and store items that should be discarded. Examples of items kept by customers who rubbish hoard would be packing materials, old food containers, broken furniture, or perishable items that have expired.

### **Diogenes Syndrome**

People diagnosed with Diogenes Syndrome experience severely deteriorated mental health that often causes them to live in isolation. The disorder is characterised by a deteriorated quality of life that is a result of extreme self-neglect. Diogenes Syndrome sufferers often compulsively collect and show symptoms of sylogomania, they cut themselves off from social interaction. It is often difficult for sufferers to get help.

## **2.2 Our customers**

We understand that there are many reasons why people hoard in their homes.

Objects may be sentimental, or the customer may feel that the objects they are keeping may come in useful, or they are keeping them 'just in case' they need them again. The customer may find it difficult

to discard things, and may have problems with decision making, organisation and order generally. They may be buying things that they may feel will 'make them happy'. They often acquire more things than they throw away, and if they do throw them away, they will struggle to cope with the feelings of loss.

Hoarding is often associated with:

- Struggling to cope with a stressful life event such as bereavement and/or trauma
- Growing up in a cluttered home
- Another mental health condition, such as anxiety, depression or attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder
- A family history of hoarding
- Lack of relationships with family or friends
- The experience of deprivation.
- Hoarding can also be unexplained.

Our customers might feel shame or embarrassment about their living conditions. They may be reluctant to seek help because of this, or they may lack insight into their situation. We adopt a non-judgemental approach to our customers who hoard, treating them fairly and with respect.

The Mental Capacity of the customer needs to be considered at an early stage, to determine if the customer has the capacity to understand and make informed decisions regarding the concerns around their hoarding behaviour. We will comply with the requirements set out in the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and will consider the Act's five key principles during interactions with customers, please refer to our **Mental Capacity Policy**. We will support other professionals carrying out mental capacity assessments where necessary.

All professionals working in providing support via social or mental health services, including housing, have a duty to explore mental capacity. In line with the Care Act (2014) our Housing and Empowering Futures teams, who are working directly with customers, will work closely with social or mental health services to explore whether the customer has the mental capacity to make decisions about maintaining a safe and habitable environment.

If there are concerns that a customer lacks mental capacity in relation to maintaining a safe and habitable environment, colleagues are encouraged to raise these and follow the **Safeguarding Adults at Risk Policy**.

## 2.3 Our Colleagues

Hoarding is recognised as self-neglect, and all colleagues who are alerted to a hoarded property must consider safeguarding under the Care Act (2014), please see responsibilities outlined in our **Safeguarding Adults at Risk Policy**.

We provide clear and practical guidance for all colleagues to follow, including the safety of our colleagues, please refer to the **Hoarding Procedure**.

## 3 Working with Customers who Hoard

### 4.1 Intervention & Support

We recognise that each case is different in terms of the type and extent of hoarding, the risk and the reasons behind the behaviour. We use a combination of support intervention and enforcement measures to address the situation.

Dealing with such cases can be complicated and time consuming. Where customers display behaviours that pose a risk or have detrimental impact on not only themselves but others around them, we will take

a graded approach to intervention. We will use the **Hoarding Risk Assessment** as well as the **Hoarding Property Risk Rating** and **Clutter Image Rating** to assess the degree of hoarding, to provide a measured response to the issue dependent upon its severity.

Each case will be assessed on an individual basis and responses will be appropriate to the circumstances of the customer involved. In some cases, it may be necessary to take steps out of sequence for a tailored and person-centred response.

Due to the nature of Hoarding Disorder and hoarding tendencies, successful intervention often requires long-term work with the customer. Progress can sometimes appear slow, but this is often critical to ensure that progress made is effective and sustained. Moving too quickly (for example, immediately offering or carrying out a 'clearance') will in most cases lead to short-term recurrence of hoarding.

Where a customer with hoarding tendencies is not currently engaged, but appears willing to accept assistance, we will:

- Persevere to find ways to engage with the customer and we will work over a long period of time to get a result if necessary
- Find the right person who can best engage with the customer – this may not be the colleague who would normally take the role but an effective relationship where there is trust is essential to getting successful outcomes
- Set up multi-agency meetings early on to determine who has the best engagement and how efforts can be co-ordinated most effectively
- Work with Hoarding Specialist Organisations to provide expert support to address the underlying causes of the behaviours as these cases take a disproportionate amount of time compared to other cases. Damage as a result of hoarding can result in costly repair works so preventative and early intervention work is key and cost effective in the long run
- Review cases after properties are cleared to aim to prevent hoarding building up again.

There are two enforcement measures that can be used to address hoarding behaviour. These are:

- **Environmental Health Services** - Hoarding may adversely impact not only the customers' home environment but beyond it too. Section 83 of the Public Health Act 1961 states, where the 'filthy or unwholesome' condition of premises is 'prejudicial to health' (likely to cause disease), or the premises 'are verminous', Environmental Health shall give notice to the owner or occupier requiring them to take steps to cleanse the premises which may include enforcing us as the landlord to take action.
- **Tenancy or Lease Enforcement Action** - We will undertake a step-up model of engagement, ensuring that we are balancing reducing risk with wellbeing.

Initially we will work with the customer to engage them in support. If they refuse, we will inform them that we need to take tenancy or lease enforcement action against if they do not engage.

We may, in the first instance, identify the need for a Care Act (2014) assessment and with consent, refer to Adult Social Care to undertake the assessment. If they refuse, we will inform them that we will be exploring legal enforcement options.

Throughout, MTVH colleagues are exploring mental capacity and working in line with GDPR in relation to not taking action or sharing information without consent. If a customer is deemed to lack capacity, or it is necessary and proportionate to share information without consent, colleagues will follow the **Safeguarding Adults at Risk Policy**.

## 4.2 Fire Service

Fire is a risk both to others living next to the hoarded property, but also to firefighters in attendance should a fire occur. Issues for the Fire Service are:

- Difficulty in gaining access to property
- Difficulty in making progress due to walking on top of hoarded materials rather than the ground
- Difficulty in locating a casualty
- Difficulty in locating Gas and Electricity shut offs
- Potential for fires being hotter due to higher-than-average quantities of flammable materials within the property
- Difficulty in applying water to seat of the fire

The Fire Service do not have legal powers of enforcement; however, they can carry out fire safety home checks and provide advice and play an important role in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

## 4.3 Gas Servicing and Electrical checks

We have a legal duty to carry out servicing of gas appliances in our properties every 12 months and electrical checks every 5 years and have a duty to carry out regular inspections inside if our customers' homes. Customers who hoard often refuse to allow access for these checks to take place or it is impossible to carry out the checks due to the hoarding and the associated risks. This constitutes a breach of tenancy conditions and can result in tenancy or lease enforcement action being taken.

We will offer as much support as we can prior to this action being taken. If we proceed with legal action, this support will continue during the process and will be ongoing should the legal process not result in eviction.

If an emergency arises, we may gain access to properties if consent is not given by the customer, please see our **Emergency Access Policy and Procedure**.

## 4.4 Tenancy or Lease Enforcement

When the customer refuses to allow access to their home or does not engage with attempts to address the hoarding, we may initiate legal action in relation to breach of conditions of tenancy. This is a last resort when all other attempts at support have been exhausted. We will liaise with our legal team and continue to seek engagement with the customer to prevent injunction or possession.

Prior to any tenancy or lease enforcement being considered, we will act in line with The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) and undertake a Proportionality Assessment. Any considerations around enforcement action to be discussed as case conferences with Assessment and Support team.

## 4.5 Working Together in Partnership

We will work with a range of services such as Social Care, Community Mental Health teams, the Fire Service, Environmental Health service and any other relevant person/agency as required. Information sharing across all relevant agencies (subject to appropriate information sharing protocols) is crucial so that all agencies involved better understand the extent and impact of the hoarding. We will make safeguarding referrals to Adult Social Care for all cases where people are at risk due to self-neglect.

## 4.6 Third Party Organisations

We have several third-party contract arrangements with landlords, support providers, contractors, and suppliers. Our contract specifications will require our partners to comply with this policy and accompanying procedures and for this to be reflected in their own policies and procedures.

#### 4 Background Legislation

- Care Act 2014
- Mental Capacity Act 2005
- Public Health Act 1961
- Anti-Social Behaviour and Policing Act (2014)
- Fire Safety Act (2021)

#### 5 Our Commitment to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

In implementing this policy MTVH will not discriminate against any colleague, customer, or stakeholder on the grounds of their sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment status, ethnic origin, age, religious belief, disability, marital status, and pregnancy/maternity.

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed for this policy and is retained by the Policy team.

#### 6 Key Policy Information

Policy Owner	Director of Operational Risk and Development
Author	Safeguarding Support Manager
Approved by	Customer Services SLT
Effective from	June 2024
Approach to review	This policy & associated Procedures will be reviewed as required by the owner for changes in legislation, regulation, and operational need. Any amendments will be appropriately consulted on and signed off before being clearly communicated to customers and colleagues. Next expected review is 5 years from the 'Effective date' of this document.
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