

Hoarding can lead to unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions

CONQUERING THE CLUTTER

Why EHPs need to consider taking a holistic, multi-agency approach to hoarding

IN NUMBERS

2-6%

Estimated percentage of population for whom hoarding can become an issue.

5%

Percentage of hoarders who come to the attention of professionals, including EH, according to Hoarding UK.

50

Average age of people seeking treatment for hoarding. Although hoarding can affect people of any age, it often begins to become a significant problem for people from their 30s.

£10,000+

Potential cost of a tenancy hoarding intervention (from Hoarding UK, but taken from an estimate by London Borough of Islington).

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every room cluttered...

Hoarding can often be dismissed as harmless eccentricity but, when it takes over someone's life, hoarding can bring with it significant health and EH issues.

Hoarding – unlike collecting, where a house may be cluttered, but things are usually well-ordered and largely accessible – can be associated with a range of mental health conditions, such as depression, psychotic disorders and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

From an environmental health perspective, hoarding can lead to unsafe and unsanitary conditions. A person who hoards may be reluctant or feel unable to have visitors or even allow tradespeople in to carry out essential repairs and maintenance.

UNSANITARY CONDITIONS

The clutter – which can be anything from newspapers, magazines and books to shopping, CDs, bags, clothes, cardboard, rubbish, even sometimes animals – can make cleaning difficult and often lead to rodent or insect infestations.

If there are animals, they may not be looked after properly, so be a health or hygiene risk. Exits and doorways may be blocked, creating a potential fire risk; there can be a risk of trips or falls; or for piles of hoarded goods to collapse or fall over.

"Hoarding affects about 2% to 6% of the population," says Abbi Hilton, senior lecturer in environmental health at the University of West England.

"Evidence suggests hoarding is under-reported and recorded. With the impacts of Covid and social isolation, we certainly expect the issue to be getting worse as there is limited support out there."

Hilton is leading a research project with academic partners at Northumbria and Anglia Ruskin universities to better understand the number of cases in the UK and the accuracy of the prevalence.

The research team is working with environmental health and fire services to try to quantify the numbers of reported cases, how these are recorded, the costs they involve, and what interventions to help are working across the country.

"Hoarding disorders are challenging to

Many of us will have a relative or family member who is something of a hoarder: house bursting to the rafters with 'stuff', never throws anything away,

treat, because many people who hoard frequently do not see it as a problem or have little awareness of how it's affecting their life or the lives of others," agrees Leanne Davenport, an EHO at Birmingham City Council. "Some may realise they have a problem but are reluctant to seek help because they feel ashamed of it."

As well as rodents and insects, hoarding can create, or exacerbate, squalor, odours, damp and mould within a property, she points out.

"Where properties are significantly accumulating items capable of harbourage, or sometimes an accumulation of food, this can attract pests – not only into the occupier's property, but can also affect neighbouring properties," explains Davenport.

"Structural issues can also cause issues in neighbouring properties if they are adjoining. I have previously seen many cases where damp and mould are an issue, roof leaks, plumbing leaks and excess cold have been an issue due to lack of structural repair."

"Both of these matters link to public health in that pests, such as rats and mice, carry harmful pathogens such as salmonella, which can make

'We certainly expect the issue to be getting worse as there is limited support out there'

humans very ill, particularly those that are vulnerable or elderly, which is often the case in hoarding scenarios. Structural disrepair conditions such as mould growth, excess cold and damp affects public health in that it can cause respiratory problems and cardiovascular problems," she adds.

NEED FOR HOLISTIC APPROACH

So, how should EHPs best help or respond when presented with a hoarding concern? Intervention through enforcement can be one route but, as Hilton emphasises, may not always be the best course of action

"Due to the nature of these cases and the mental health implications that are often involved, enforcement action is often not the most appropriate response and can sometimes make the situation worse," she says.

"EHPs have a wide range of enforcement available to them. It really depends on the case, the environmental health issues, and what impact this is causing," she adds.

Where pests are concerned, enforcement can be taken under the Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949. This allows a local authority to act when there are pests, while the Public



Many people who hoard do not see it as a problem

NEED TO KNOW

Hoarding is estimated to affect 2% to 6% of the population, and can often be associated with a range of mental health conditions.

It can lead to unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions, including mould, damp, fire risks, trip hazards and maintenance issues.

EHPs need to consider taking a holistic, multi-agency approach, combining enforcement with support and the sharing of best practice, including therapeutic and health support for the underlying condition. CIEH's Professional Practice Note, 'Hoarding and How to Approach it', is a good starting point and can be found at bit.ly/47kkFpT

Health Act 1936 may be considered if premises are filthy and/or verminous.

If the issues are structural, the Housing Act 2004 can be used to force structural improvements to the property, or where Category 1 hazards are identified, the property can be prohibited. Alternatively, and if structural issues are affecting neighbouring properties, this can be deemed a statutory nuisance or be prejudicial to health under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, Davenport points out.

If an enforcement notice is ignored, an EHP can decide whether to prosecute or arrange for works in default to be carried out, where this option applies under legislation. "Ultimately, each case must be considered on an individual basis – there is never a 'one size fits all' form of action," says Davenport.

"Undertaking prosecution is costly, but also does not fit appropriately in a lot of hoarding cases," she adds.

"Any enforcement action taken against a hoarder may potentially have adverse effects on their mental health and this must be considered when deciding on action. Prosecution will also not likely resolve the environmental health factors – the hoarder can be fined following prosecution, but the works required to resolve the issues will still be present."

It can be difficult to engage with a hoarder, especially if they're reclusive, agrees Hilton. "Listen, build trust with the person and include the person in conversations and plans to manage the hoarding at all stages. Be clear in your communication and prepare the individual for what's coming. Engage mental health services and the GP early on.

"Without this, the cycle will continue.

Engaging the services of therapeutic listening service, such as a support group, can create opportunities for long-term success. Support groups provide a safe, non-judgemental space where emotional and practical support can be provided," she adds.

OFTEN-HIDDEN PROBLEM

Both Hilton and Davenport believe the profession could be more proactive in addressing hoarding. But the often-hidden nature of the problem, coupled with EH's resourcing and capacity issues, means more creative approaches are often the best answer.

Hilton, for example, points to Gloucester City Council, which recently introduced a specific hoarding care and support initiative, working with the charity Hoarding UK. "Enforcement options are considered and used to enable action to be taken, along with delivery of decluttering support, which is complemented with therapeutic support, as opposed to the traditional 'blitz clean' approach," she explains.

"Clearances are being achieved where appropriate, and delivered through works in agreement, along with sensitive repayment plans. There is also a positive focus on waste and recycling services to encourage recycling and repurposing of items, therefore focusing on green messaging and encouragement," she adds.

"Sharing best practice is a really positive way of moving forwards," Hilton continues, pointing to CIEH's guidance on hoarding.

"I believe there needs to be an alternative – an organisation or department that can proactively engage with such residents and have the time to work with them to resolve the hoarding issues, especially those hoarding cases where there are no EH issues present," agrees Davenport in conclusion.

"As EH is an enforcement field, such residents are often reluctant to engage with us. Even though we continue to put all of our effort in, sometimes in these cases it just doesn't seem enough," she adds.

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