

1. Introduction

This policy statement outlines Exeter City Council's (ECC), Housing Service approach to identifying and dealing with hoarding and clutter in Council properties.

A hoarding disorder is where someone acquires an excessive number of items and stores them in a chaotic manner, usually resulting in unmanageable amounts of clutter. The items can be of little or no monetary value.

Many people collect items at some point throughout their life, however, there is a percentage of people for whom collecting becomes an unmanageable pattern of behaviour. Hoarding is a recognised mental health problem and between 2-5% of the UK population can be classed as hoarders.

Hoarding is not the preserve of any particular group of people or tenure but collections are likely to grow as people age. People who hoard usually have some or potentially all of the following characteristics:

- An unusual and strong emotional connection to personal possessions/material things;
- Difficulty organising, prioritising or making a decision to discard an item;
- Experience anxiety and stress. Collecting items provides comfort and the individual can show symptoms from mild anxiety to panic attacks;
- Socially isolated;
- Exhibit self-neglect;
- Exhibit churning – moving items around or storing them elsewhere so it appears they have been removed.

Hoarding is considered a significant problem if:

- the amount of clutter interferes with everyday living – for example, the person is unable to use their kitchen or bathroom and cannot access rooms
- the clutter is causing significant distress or negatively affecting the quality of life of the person or their family – for example, they become upset if someone tries to clear the clutter and their relationship suffers

Failure to identify and address hoarding carries a number of risks:

- It increases the risk of fire in property as the material hoarded is often highly flammable and the likelihood of the fire spreading to adjoining properties;
- Fire and Rescue Services can be impeded by the amount of items and inherent increased risk to fire fighters;
- An increased risk of accident and harm to the tenant/household members;
- Neighbours can be compromised through an increased opportunity for infestations from mice, rats or insects;
- Increased repairs and structural damage as a hoarder is less likely to report or allow access to their home;
- Difficulty or inability of Council staff or contractors to carry out legislative safety checks and inspections;
- Significant management costs due to household clearance and the repair of empty homes;

- Cost of legal action if enforcement action has to be taken.

Hoarding disorders are challenging to resolve because many people who hoard frequently do not see it as a problem, or have little awareness of how it is affecting their life or the lives of others.

Many people may realise that they have a problem but are reluctant to seek help because they feel ashamed, humiliated or guilty.

For the reasons explained above, preventive measures must be put in place to reduce health and safety risks to the tenant and others as well as to reduce neglect and damage to the property. Where the Council has not been successful in working with the tenant to effect the necessary changes in behaviour, the Housing Service will take appropriate enforcement action in connection with any breaches of the tenancy agreement.

2. Scope

This policy sets out how the Housing Service will respond to issues that arise when properties are cluttered or are being used to hoard large amounts of possessions, including animals.

This policy covers the following points and should be read in conjunction with the related documents as stated below:

- a) Tenancy Management
- b) Health and Safety issues
- c) Safeguarding
- d) Tenancy and Property inspections
- e) Animal Hoarding
- f) Partnership Working
- g) Tenancy Enforcement

Related Documents

- a) Anti-Social Behaviour Policy
- b) Decant Policy
- c) Tenancy Agreement
- d) Safeguarding Policy

3. Tenancy Management

The Housing Service conducts visits to tenants and their households. Staff are trained in safeguarding and are required to identify any issues that arise when properties and/or gardens are becoming cluttered or are being used to hoard large amounts of possessions or animals using the Clutter Image Rating Scale and report them to the relevant Housing Officer.

It is important to identify cluttering early on so that the potential to develop into hoarding can be managed and the individual can be supported as appropriate.

In extreme cases, piles of clutter can become a health and safety risk and can result in trips, slips and falls. If the home is difficult to clean, living conditions can be unhygienic and can lead to rodent or insect infestations, blocked drains and other

problems that may also affect neighbouring properties. Staff will identify any risks to the tenant, their household, visitors or neighbouring properties and to take appropriate action in accordance with the severity of the risk.

Often the challenge will be that the hoarder does not recognise that the hoarding is actually an issue or that they are in fact hoarding or presenting a risk to themselves, the households or those that live in the block if the property is in a block.

Issues with hoarding/clutter can generate complaints of anti-social behaviour and these will be dealt in line with the Anti-social Behaviour Policy and Procedures. Complaints may include those relating to untidy gardens, unwelcoming odours from the property or infestation of vermin.

The Housing Service is likely to become aware of hoarding/clutter issues:-

- At the regular property inspections carried out by Housing Officers
- During routine planned maintenance works due to the property (gas servicing or property upgrades)
- When complaints of anti-social behaviour are received; for example, those concerning the presence of vermin or clutter in outside spaces
- When reports of welfare concerns from family members or neighbours are received.
- Contact or referral from external agencies

It is common that once any issues of hoarding have come to the Council's attention, the situation is likely to be severe resulting in breaches of the tenancy agreement. Housing Officers will raise awareness of any breaches with the tenant and will take appropriate action.

When an issue has been identified the Housing Officer will make contact with an appropriate support service and regularly visit the property and will put together an action plan to work with the tenant to reduce the hoarding issues and to address any health and safety concerns. We understand that it may be a slow process in reducing rubbish and clutter from the property.

Tenants are responsible for the behaviour of members of their household and are required to comply with the terms and conditions of the tenancy agreement.

4. Health & Safety

Hoarders can accumulate volumes of rubbish or clutter leading to unsafe and unhygienic conditions to the property which can pose a significant health and safety risk.

The accumulation of combustible material and increased likelihood of ignition significantly amplifies the risk to the tenant and neighbours, particularly in blocks of flats where escape routes can be compromised, more dwelling may be affected and fire-fighting is logistically more difficult.

It is generally not seen as good practice to completely clear the rubbish or clutter away from the property. This is due to the fact that it is unlikely to solve the problem. In addition, the clutter may often build up again. The Housing Officer will work with the tenant to resolve the issue but will not offer extra storage space as this is only a quick fix, costly and does not address the problem. We will only offer additional storage for a maximum of 28 days following possession action. However, as a

landlord we have a responsibility to ensure that our properties are safe to live in. If there is a detrimental health or safety risk, then any rubbish or clutter will be cleared to comply with legislative requirements.

In extreme cases of hoarding where a serious health and safety issue has been identified or where there is damage to the property, then it may be necessary for us to decant the tenant and their household to allow access to the accommodation. This will be dealt with in line with the Decant Policy. Any costs incurred due to neglect or wilful damage will be recharged to the tenant.

5. Safeguarding

Cases of hoarding where children are present in the household should be referred to Early Help or MASH depending on the severity of the situation.

Hoarding can be a manifestation of self-neglect and it is important that advice is sought from the Devon Adult Safeguarding Team as to whether a safeguarding referral should be made. This will be dependent on whether the individual has capacity to give consent and whether or not they have care and support needs.

In all cases advice can be sought from the Housing Safeguarding Leads as set out in the council's Safeguarding Policy.

6. Tenancy and Property Inspections

Housing Officers carry out tenancy and property inspections on all properties. During these visits they will identify if there is an issue with hoarding at the property or if access routes for emergency services are blocked. When such issues have been identified, the Officer will work with the tenant and involve relevant agencies to address the problem.

7. Animal Hoarding

Animal hoarding is more uncommon than Hoarding of collectables and other items. It is considered a problem if the owner:

- is not able to provide basic needs for the animals, such as food, shelter and veterinary care
- is allowing their animals to live in poor conditions – for example, overcrowding or severe lack of hygiene
- is not aware that the animals are having a negative effect on their personal health or the health of family members

The person hoarding will often not understand they are neglecting the animals and putting their own health and that of others at risk. They often have an emotional attachment to their pets, making it extremely difficult to give up any animals during treatment.

Where cases of animal hoarding have been identified, the Housing Service will involve the RSPCA and other agencies, as appropriate, for further advice and assistance to ensure that any welfare concerns are addressed.

8. Partnership Working

It is recognised that it may be necessary to involve a range of agencies to play a part in trying to reduce hoarding issues and ultimately to improve the quality of life for the tenant and their household. The Housing Service engages with an accredited De-Cluttering organisation to provide support to the tenant and provide expert advice on the best approach to deal effectively with the hoarding.

The Housing Service will work with a range of agencies such as adult and children's social services, community mental health teams, the Fire Service, Environmental Health Service and family members.

9. Tenancy Enforcement

There is a variety of tools and powers that can be used to address tenancy breaches. However, it is understood that there are no "one-size fits all" solutions. The Housing Service will liaise with experienced practitioners to achieve the best result in a given case taking into account our duty to equality and the fostering of relationships. Under the Equality Act 2010 people who hoard or clutter would be considered to have a protected characteristic and is a recognised mental illness. This does mean that with any potential legal action for possession the Housing Service will need to have ensured it has taken this into account in order to ensure a successful outcome.

Where there is a problem with gaining access to the property to fulfil our legal obligations or where it has been identified that there is a health and safety risk which could have a detrimental effect on others, we will take the necessary legal steps to obtain an injunction. Any costs incurred in doing this will be recharged to the tenant.

The tenant will also be recharged for any damage to the property caused by neglect or wilful damage. This will be dealt with in line with the terms and condition of the tenancy agreement.

10. Equality and Diversity

The Housing Service will tailor its services to meet the diverse needs of individuals. The aim will be to foster good relations with people when providing services to eliminate discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity. All action taken by us will be in accordance with the requirements of current legislation and the council's Equality and Diversity Policy.

11. Procedures and Review

In conjunction with this policy staff will be provided with an operational procedure on the appropriate action to take in order to tackle cases of hoarding which will include how to identify the early signs, the agencies to engage with in the most extreme cases and regular training.

This Policy has been written in line with good practice and current relevant legislation. Unless there any changes to such legislation beforehand, the Policy will be reviewed every three years.