UK Government

Hoarding Fire Safety Checklist

Fire Safety & Access Assessment

- **Clear Entrance and Exit:** Are all primary entrances and exits completely free of obstructions?
- **Internal Door Function:** Can all internal doors open fully and close securely?
- **Escape Routes:** Is there a defined, clear path through the home to allow for a quick exit in smoky conditions?

Important: please review the accompanying document of considerations before attempting any action.

Detection & Emergency Planning

- **Enhanced Detection:** Are there smoke and heat detectors in high-risk areas (e.g. the room where they sleep)? At a minimum there should be a detector on each floor in the hallway, however more may be needed depending on individual risks.
- **Care Line Link:** Do they have a reliable way to contact emergency services if needed, such as a mobile phone? Has a Care Line or telecare referral been explored to support them if they ever need urgent help?
- **Fire Service Notification:** Has the resident shared their sleeping location and clutter level with the local Fire and Rescue Service and requested a Home Fire Safety Visit?

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Access to Key Amenities

- **Sleep:** Does the resident have somewhere to sleep?
- **Water:** Does the resident have access to hot and cold running water, adequate toilet facilities, and a way to shut off the water in an emergency, such as a stop valve or water meter?
- **Food:** Does the resident have access to meals (either cooking in the home, takeaways or help from others)? If cooking, is the area clear of combustible materials?
- **Electricity:** Does the resident have access to electricity? If so, consider it's safety; for example, is there daisy chaining of extension leads? Is there socket overloading?

Hazard Mitigation & Behaviour

- **Waste Management:** Is the resident able to dispose of waste in a way that feels manageable for them? Do they have a routine for waste collection?
- **Clutter Rating:** Assess the home against the Clutter Image Rating (CIR) scale (If over 5, make a safeguarding referral to the local Fire and Rescue Service to carry out a Home Fire Safety visit).
- **Professional Support:** Have conversations taken place with the resident (and any carers) about what feels safe and emotionally manageable regarding item reduction?
- **Ignition Source Clearance:** Are items kept at a safe distance from heaters, hobs, and electrical outlets?

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This document is designed to supplement the fire safety checklist. When dealing with hoarding behaviours, the physical environment is only one part of the challenge; success requires a nuanced, multi-agency approach that balances immediate fire risks with the long-term mental wellbeing of the occupant.

What is hoarding?

Hoarding disorder is a recognised mental health condition included in the DSM-5 and ICD-11 within the obsessive-compulsive and related disorders category. It is thought to affect around 2–5% of people. People with hoarding disorder find it **very difficult to let go of possessions**, even when the items have little or no practical value. This difficulty is often linked to a strong feeling that the items must be saved, and to distress at the thought of throwing them away. Some people may also collect or acquire more items than they need. Over time, possessions can build up and make **living spaces difficult or unsafe to use**. People's understanding of the problem can vary.

Some people recognise that hoarding is affecting their life, while others may not see it as a problem. Hoarding disorder can also occur alongside other difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or alcohol misuse. Having another difficulty **should not disregard hoarding behaviour as an issue** within it's own right. Stressful or traumatic life events, including bereavement, can trigger hoarding behaviours or make existing symptoms worse.

1. Pre-Entry Planning and Operational Logistics

Before attempting to enter the property, comprehensive preparation is required to ensure staff safety and legal compliance.

- **Mandatory Risk Assessment:** A formal health and safety risk assessment must be completed prior to entry. This ensures the safety of anyone entering a hoarded property.
- **Multi-Agency Framework:** It is recommended that no single agency should manage a hoarding case in isolation. Ensure a collaborative response is established (e.g., Fire and Rescue Service, Social Care, Environmental Health, Mental Health, Housing, etc).
- **Access and Property Intelligence:**
  - **Tenancy Status:** Identify if the property is owner-occupied, social housing, private-rented, or "tied" housing. This dictates your legal right of entry and the landlord's obligations.
  - **Property Profile:** Note the build type (e.g., detached, terrace, flat, maisonette). Assess how the fire load within the property affects neighbouring homes.
- **Access and Property Intelligence:**
  - **GDPR Compliance:** While assessing risks to neighbours, ensure all data sharing is proportionate and legally grounded so as not to breach GDPR. If this is a high-risk adjoining property, consider carrying out a leaflet drop or door knock service in neighbouring homes, to keep residents safe whilst maintaining confidentiality.
- **Logistics and Funding:**
  - **Timescales:** It is recommended to define a realistic implementation plan.Rapid clearance is often counter- productive; a phased approach is required.
  - **Funding Streams:** Establish who will support and fund the hazard removal. Has the Environmental Health team been consulted prior to considering statutory notices or funding grants? (Not everybody wants a skip on their drive.
  - **Legal Standing:** Verify if there are any active eviction notices, as this will significantly impact the occupant's willingness to engage.

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2. Engagement, Capacity, and Advocacy

Working with individuals who hoard requires a person-centred approach. Without the occupant's cooperation, any physical intervention is likely to be temporary.

- **Building Rapport:** Trust must be established before attempting to "isolate" or remove hazards. Forced removal without consent can lead to severe psychological trauma.
- **Assessing Capacity:** Does the occupant have the mental capacity to understand the specific risks fire poses to themselves and the community? Capacity must always be assumed until a professional has advised that there is a cognitive impairment.
- **The Role of Advocacy:** It's important to advise that statutory advocacy is available in England. In the devolved nations it is recognised as good practice.
  - Inform the occupant of their right to an independent advocate. An advocate can bridge communication gaps, reduce anxiety, and ensure the occupant's voice is heard during multi-agency meetings.
- **Medical Integration:** It is recommended to seek explicit consent to speak with the occupant's GP unless there are serious safeguarding concerns. Information regarding diagnosed anxiety, OCD, or depression is vital for tailoring the support plan.

3. Hazard Reduction and Fire Mitigation

Once the environment is understood and a relationship is built, the focus shifts to reducing the immediate threat of fire.

- **Professional Support for In-Home Practical Support:** It's recommended that any removal of items must be supported by the professionals involved, including a mental health professional.
- **Pacing the Intervention:** Removing items too quickly can trigger a "rebounding" effect where the occupant acquires more items to self-soothe. Seek clinical advice on how to remove items without them being replaced.
- **Fire and Rescue Service Involvement:**
  - Request a Home Fire Safety visit from the local Fire and Rescue Service.
  - Check for any history of previous fire service interventions or "near misses" at the address.
- **Fire Safety Equipment & Installation:**
  - **Specialised Kit:** Consider the provision of fire-retardant bedding and mats, or the installation of a personal protection MIST system.
  - **Detection:** Prioritise 10-year sealed battery alarms over smoke alarms with replaceable batteries.
  - **Responsibility for Installation:** In social housing, this is typically the landlord's duty. In private tenancies, ensure contractors have safe access to the property to complete the work - this may require a "pathway" to be cleared first.
- **Evacuation planning:** It is recommended that the fire and rescue service engage with the occupant to develop a viable escape plan. In a hoarded environment, standard exit routes may be blocked; identifying the "least obstructed" path is a priority.

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The Fire Risk Factors:

Through long-term research from Fire and Rescue services, it has been established that there are fire death risk factors that link to how people die in fire-related incidents which are highlighted below. When doing a risk assessment of the level of risk in a hoarded property, risk of a person(s) having a serious if not fatal fire-related incident increases by each box that is ticked:

- ○ Living alone
- ○ Having care and support needs
- ○ Smoking
- ○ Drug (prescription and recreational) and alcohol use
- ○ Mobility issues, physical illness or disability
- ○ Poor mental health
- ○ Dementia/Alzheimer's/ Memory impairment
- ○ Sensory impairment
- ○ Oxygen use
- ○ Learning disorders/ Neurodivergence
- ○ Elderly (65+)
- ○ No/insufficient working home smoke alarms
- ○ Excess clutter in the home

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