Open Letter to the UK Government and Relevant National Bodies and Organisations: Addressing the Growing Problem of Hoarding

Date: 9th May 2025

To whom it may concern,

We, the members of the Steering Group of the UK Hoarding Partnership, are writing to you to raise awareness about the increasingly prevalent issue of hoarding behaviours across the UK and to ask for your support in addressing this growing problem.

At its most extreme, People who Hoard suffer from Hoarding Disorder , a recognised mental health condition in which the person over-accumulates items to the extent that their living areas become extremely cluttered, and normal daily routines (e.g. cooking, washing) become impossible[1]. This can have serious consequences for the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of those affected; as well as having a negative impact on their families (especially children and young people), the wider community, and the service providers and professionals who work with them.

The prevalence of hoarding in the UK is estimated to affect between 2.5% - 6% of the population (approximately 4 million people), though this is recognised as being an under-estimate, as People who Hoard are often ashamed and feel stigmatised about their hoarding behaviours. Even at this lower estimate, hoarding is more common than disorders like schizophrenia or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder[2], and is associated with a clear disability burden, higher than that of major medical/psychiatric disorders such as diabetes, major depression, and chronic pain[3].

Hoarding is often misunderstood, or dismissed as mere 'clutter', 'laziness', or a 'lifestyle choice', but is a complex mental health condition deeply rooted in emotional distress, and underlying trauma, often stemming from adverse childhood experiences[4]. For People who Hoard, it can result in unsafe living conditions, social isolation, and a diminished ability to manage day-to-day responsibilities[5,6]. Hoarding is a long-term condition, with few effective treatment options, and so hoarding behaviours are often left unresolved.

In 2024, the U.S Senate Committee on Aging released a report entitled "*The Consequences of Clutter*", which revealed the serious effects of hoarding on the individual, the wider community, and on first responders[7]. In the U.K. despite growing recognition of this issue, hoarding continues to be underrepresented in both public awareness and policy. People who Hoard often struggle to find adequate support and services, and are frequently overlooked by social care systems, health services, housing authorities, and mental health professionals[8]. As a result, the issue is exacerbated, leading to harmful and dangerous outcomes not only for those affected, but also for their families and the communities around them.

Dealing with hoarding behaviours can be very time-consuming (there is no 'quick fix') and it can be very expensive[9]. Support and service provision have fallen to grassroots initiatives encompassing private and third sector organisations, but mostly to local authorities who as a result face considerable financial strain and are often ill-equipped to address the complex needs of People who Hoard. Moreover, in the absence of a coordinated national strategy, current support services are often disjointed. This leads to significant inefficiencies, and ineffective expenditures, while those affected continue without adequate help. Because of this, and due to the complexity of individual cases, hoarding often 'falls between the cracks' and remains unresolved.

The UK Hoarding Partnership was established in 2024, in recognition of growing demands for support from organisations and councils, to try and bring together a cohesive network of professionals and people with lived experience, to share 'best practice' and support.

Key Concerns:

1. **Public Health and Safety**: Hoarding can lead to hazardous living environments, including fire risks, unsanitary and unsafe housing conditions, and blockages of essential exit routes, which pose a danger not only to the individual, but to their neighbours, and the professionals called in to try and resolve the issue. In some cases, these environments can even lead to infestations or health emergencies.

2. **Public Awareness and Education**: There is a pressing need for broader public understanding of hoarding behaviours. Educating communities, professionals in social care, housing providers, social workers, environmental health, healthcare, emergency services, and even family members on how to support individuals who are struggling with hoarding, could help reduce stigma and promote more compassionate interventions.

3. **Mental Health and Support Gaps**: Hoarding is often linked to underlying mental health issues such as trauma, anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. It may also be linked to neurodivergent conditions such as autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. However, mental health services and treatments that address hoarding specifically remain scarce, and are underfunded. Many individuals affected by hoarding feel reluctant to seek

help due to stigma, lack of awareness, or fear of eviction, or other legal consequences.

4. **Legal and Housing Implications**: Registered social landlords and other housing providers are sometimes faced with challenging situations where tenants' hoarding behaviours lead to breaches of tenancy agreements or safety policies (often as 'anti-social behaviour'). More cases are likely to come to light following implementation of the Social Housing Regulation Act 2024 and the requirement to prioritise safe and decent homes. Unfortunately, tenancy issues relating to the condition of the property are often handled through eviction or legal action rather than providing support to address the root causes of the problem. More effective policies that balance legal responsibilities with compassionate mental health support are urgently needed.

What Needs to Change:

1. **Development of National Guidelines:** Currently there are no national guidelines to help professionals who work with People who Hoard to firstly recognise it, and then deal with it effectively. There is a real need to thus equip social workers, housing officers, environmental health officers, emergency service workers, and other frontline professionals, with the knowledge and tools to identify hoarding, and address it appropriately. This would allow for better early intervention and more compassionate handling of hoarding cases. While there is an awareness campaign (Hoarding Awareness Week takes place May 12th–16th), this could be more widely publicised. This would help reduce stigma and encourage earlier intervention.

2. **Integration of Services**: Develop a more integrated 'multi-agency' approach where mental health services, social care, environmental health, professional organisers, and housing authorities work collaboratively to provide a holistic support system for individuals living with hoarding disorder. This can help ensure that people receive appropriate care, resources, and interventions to improve their living conditions, while reducing spending overall.

3. **Increased Funding for Mental Health Services**: Allocate more resources to mental health services that specifically address hoarding behaviours and Hoarding Disorder. Specialist treatment and interventions, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy tailored to hoarding, should be made widely accessible, and alternative interventions based around trauma-informed approaches, peer-support, and multi-agency working, need to be explored and evaluated.

4. **Research and Data Collection**: Invest in research to better understand the causes, impacts, and effective interventions for hoarding disorder. Collecting data on the scale of the issue in the UK, and how it impacts the individual and the wider community could help inform policy decisions and better allocation of resources. It would also ultimately reduce costs to the NHS and to the many organisations who deal with hoarding behaviours.
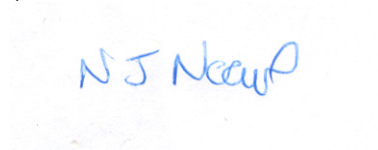
Conclusion:

Hoarding is an issue that cannot be ignored. It is an urgent problem that affects both individuals and communities, and it requires a compassionate, coordinated, and effective response. We urge you to prioritize this issue within your policies and take the necessary steps to ensure that individuals suffering from hoarding disorder receive the support and care they need.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. We look forward to seeing meaningful progress on this issue in the near future.

Yours sincerely,

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Citations

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