

Hoarding

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Responsible work team: **Community Safety Policy and Project Team**

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Summary

This policy sets out how to implement the London Fire Brigade's strategy on hoarding. It will provide clarity on:

- how to identify and assess the level of hoarding in a home using the Clutter Image Rating scale (CIR);
- what actions to take following identification of hoarding;
- how, when, and where to record information;
- guidance around carrying out a home fire safety visit in homes where hoarding is present;
- tactical plans and forward strategies.

As hoarding behaviour is a complex matter and will require additional reporting and referring processes the following policies should be read for further advice and guidance:

- Policy number 736 – Safeguarding adults at risk
- Policy number 305 – Safeguarding children at risk
- Policy number 1010 – Home fire safety visits (HFSV) policy
- Policy number 1024 – Site specific risk information knowledge, skills and competence

1 Background

- 1.1 Following a fatal fire, a review takes place so that lessons can be learned and used to inform operational processes and to plan future community safety activities. This review process highlighted the significant number of fatal fires where hoarding disorder was present and the increased risk of fire associated with hoarding disorder. These findings were supported by information from the Operational Review Team who reported an increase in the number of incidents at premises involving hoarding.
- 1.2 The strategy for addressing the fire related risks associated with hoarding disorder was agreed at Strategy Committee in November 2012. The strategy acknowledges that although the Brigade cannot expect to prevent a person from hoarding, we can take steps to reduce the risk of fire through the home fire safety visit (HFSV) process, and in partnership with local agencies.

2 Introduction

- 2.1 The risk of a fire starting is increased by hoarding disorder as combustible materials are more likely to be stored close to, or in contact with, heat sources such as cookers and heaters. This risk is increased further when clutter in the home reaches extreme levels as utilities to the home may be disconnected leading to unsafe practices such as the use of camping stoves for cooking and candles for lighting. Access and egress to and from the home can also be restricted which means the person's escape may be slowed down or prevented in the event of a fire.
- 2.2 Fire loading in hoarding properties presents risks to neighbours too as it increases the likelihood of fire travelling to their properties. If there is a fire, the structural integrity of the building may be compromised during and after firefighting operations, due to the absorption of water by the hoarded materials.
- 2.3 The deep-seated, smouldering fires associated with hoarding require a significant weight of attack over a protracted period of time, creating physically demanding conditions for firefighters. In addition, fire loading in hoarding properties is likely to increase the severity of a fire, impede access and egress to the building and could lead to abnormal fire growth and development.

3 Aims and objectives

- 3.1 The aim of the hoarding policy is to reduce the fire risks associated with hoarding behaviour for people with hoarding disorder, their neighbours, and the local community and firefighters. This will be achieved by:
- raising awareness of the fire risks associated with hoarding to people who exhibit hoarding behaviour, members of the public and staff;
 - working with local partners to identify people who hoard in their area and support effective outcomes;
 - providing people who hoard with fire safety advice specific to the risks associated with hoarding via the HFSV process;
 - familiarising staff on the purpose and use of the CIR;
 - raising staff awareness of how to respond to and record instances of hoarding when visiting premises, whether attending an incident or during a HFSV; and
 - recording instances of excessive hoarding on the Operational Risk Database (ORD) to inform operational planning at future incidents.

4 Definition of hoarding disorder

- 4.1 Hoarding behaviour was previously seen as a symptom of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) but has received a separate clinical definition of 'hoarding disorder' and will be defined as:
- "persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value."
- 4.2 There are three defining traits of hoarding disorder:
- the acquisition of, and failure to discard, a large number of possessions that appear to be of no or limited value to others;
 - living spaces sufficiently cluttered so that using rooms as intended is impossible, and
 - causes significant distress or impairment in an individual's ability to function.
- 4.3 Hoarding disorder is common to all cultures, income and education levels and can be triggered by a stressful life event, such as bereavement. It is often associated with depression, dementia, autistic spectrum disorder, anxiety or social phobia and a person is more likely to hoard if they have experienced deprivation in the past or if there is a family history of hoarding.
- 4.4 It is a complex, chronic and progressive disorder which usually begins when a person is a teenager and reaches extreme levels around the mid-30s. However, help is often not sought until around the age of 50 which may be because:
- it is common for people with hoarding disorder to lack insight into the severity of the problem;
 - the hoarding has reached a level where it causes the person, and/or those around them, severe distress or impairment;
 - people with hoarding disorder are typically socially isolated and often reluctant to allow access to their home.

5 Dealing with hoarding behaviour

Identifying hoarding behaviour

- 5.1 Identifying and classifying hoarding behaviour can be subjective as what it means to have a cluttered home can vary from person to person; the layout of each home is different; clutter may be stored at different levels within a room. To overcome this, the CIR was developed by psychologists specialising in the treatment of people with hoarding disorder.

- 5.2 The benefit of the CIR is that it allows objectivity when assessing the level of hoarding by providing a visual assessment tool. This creates consistency and provides a common language and reference point when discussing concerns with partner agencies and notifying them of hoarding concerns.
- 5.3 The CIR is a rising pictorial scale of nine equidistant photos showing clutter in three rooms – living room, bedroom, and kitchen. It is an internationally recognised assessment tool used by psychologists working with people who hoard and commonly used by the health and social care sector in the UK.
- 5.4 In order to assist with identifying and assessing levels of hoarding behaviour, the CIR scale has been adopted by LFB for staff to use whenever it is encountered (Appendix 1).
- 5.5 Depending on whether it is a single or multi-appliance station, each station will be issued with either three or six laminated copies of the CIR. A set should be kept on each appliance at all times.

Assessing hoarding behaviour

- 5.6 When hoarding behaviour is encountered, the CIR should be used to assess the level of clutter in the home by selecting the image which best matches the clutter in each room. As it is an internal assessment tool for use by station based staff, the CIR should not be used in consultation with the person displaying the hoarding disorder/the resident receiving the advice.
- 5.7 Unless the property is a one room flat, a single room should not be used in isolation to assess hoarding behaviour and the level of clutter throughout the entire home should be taken into account. The general state of repair of the home should also be considered, as should any signs that the utilities to the home have been disconnected or are unusable i.e. alternative methods of lighting, cooking, heating and sanitation in use.
- 5.8 The actions to take will depend on the level of clutter in the property and how the hoarding behaviour came to the attention of the Brigade. A step by step guide setting out the process to be followed is described below. A flowchart of the whole process can be found in Appendix 2.
- 5.9 In all cases consideration must be given on how to carry out HFSVs in hoarding properties. For this reason, best practice guidance for carrying out a HFSV at a hoarding property has been developed with assistance from subject matter experts (Appendix 3), as has fire safety advice specific to the risks associated with hoarding behaviour (Appendix 4).
- 5.10 Hoarding specific fire safety advice has been incorporated into a Brigade branded flyer which can be ordered via Hotwire and a copy of which should be left with residents following a HFSV at a hoarding property.
- 5.11 When a person's hoarding (self-neglect) behaviour puts their safety and wellbeing at risk, and/or poses a risk to the safety and wellbeing of others a safeguarding referral or a welfare concern should be raised with the local authority and/or other partner agencies.
- 5.12 In cases where persons under the age of 18 are identified as being at risk within the scope of the safeguarding process, the matter would automatically become a child protection issue and should be dealt with accordingly.
- 5.13 Hoarding behaviour may be encountered in a number of ways during the course of normal duties e.g. in attendance at an incident, during a HFSV (or during a grouped risk visit event) and/or while carrying out visual audits. Referrals may also be received from local partner agencies e.g. adult social services teams, and/or from members of the public such as neighbours, friends or the family of the person who hoards.

- 5.14 However hoarding behaviour is encountered, where possible, a HFSV should be carried out, this should include specific advice around reducing the fire risks associated with hoarding behaviour.
- Where the hoarding has been identified following a fire at the property, it should be recorded on the Incident Management Systems (IMS).
 - If referred by a partner agency, following the visit the station commander should inform the partner agency that a HFSV has been carried out and explain the fire safety advice given to the person with hoarding disorder.
- 5.15 When the HFSV is carried out, if possible, arrange for a family member/carer or representative from partner agency to be present, so that they can support the resident in applying the advice given, following the visit.

Hoarding assessed up to level 4

- 5.16 A welfare concern should be considered where it is identified that the hoarding in a property is up to level 4 on the CIR. For further guidance see: Policy number 736 - Safeguarding adults at risk.

Hoarding assessed at levels 5 - 9

- 5.17 Hoarding behaviour falls under self neglect and when assessed at level 5 on the CIR and above should be considered as a safeguarding matter.
- 5.18 A safeguarding referral should be raised to the local authority. For further guidance see: Policy number 736 - Safeguarding adults at risk.

6 Recording and monitoring systems

Incident Management System (IMS)

- 6.1 Where hoarding is a factor in a fire, this should be recorded in the IMS record. Within the 'Damage' section of the record, select 'excessive and dangerous storage' in response to the question 'human factors contributing to the fire'. Appendix 5 provides screen shots showing where this area is located on IMS.

Operational Risk Database (ORD)

- 6.2 Once hoarding has been identified as being at or above level 5 on the CIR at a premises, the risk should be assessed using the risk grading matrix in Policy number 1024 – Site specific risk information knowledge, skills and competence, ensuring that any tactical plan put in place is appropriate to the risk, then recorded and entered onto the ORD. A box has been added to the risk matrix for this purpose. The following information should be recorded:
- type of items stored (newspapers, cylinders, paints/thinners, electrical items);
 - early consideration of additional resources;
 - appropriate weight of attack relevant to a property with heavy fire loading;
 - identification of bio-hazards such as human waste or medical equipment (hypodermic syringes).
- 6.3 This process should also be applied when a partner agency has confirmed hoarding at level 5 – 9, but subsequent contact with the resident has resulted in refusal for a HFSV to take place. This ensures the risk attached to the premises can still be considered.

- 6.4 Hoarding entries on the ORD must be reviewed as per the visit frequency assigned to the entry following a Premises Risk Assessment.
- 6.5 Especially in the case of 6.3 where we have not been able to carry out a HFSV, an update should first be sought from local partners/referring agency such as the Local Authority or Adult Social Services Team where they are in contact with the person with hoarding disorder. Where partners are unable to assist, the station commander should consider the most appropriate solution (e.g. a re-visit) to determine if the ORD entry is still warranted, accurate and sufficient.

HFSV database person at risk (PAR)

- 6.6 Levels of hoarding should now be recorded on the HFSV database. Guidance notes can be found on the database to assist staff to identify the levels of hoarding.
- 6.7 Any risk to the resident which could not be addressed solely as part of a home fire safety visit, must be raised as either a welfare concern or a safeguarding referral via the HFSV database as appropriate. This can be done by checking the tick box for 'Person At Risk' (PAR) on the HFSV database, which in turn will open up the PAR form for staff to use. For further guidance see: Policy number 736 - Safeguarding adults at risk.
- 6.8 By raising a welfare concern or safeguarding referral via the PAR form, staff will be required to select the appropriate on duty member of senior staff they are raising the concern/referral to (station commander/borough commander/officer of the day). An automatic email will then be generated and sent to the selected member of staff for further action, and the base station commander if they are not on duty, to make them aware of a welfare concern or safeguarding referral on their ground. Please note, the social issues mailbox will also automatically be included when raising a concern/referral using the PAR form.
- 6.9 Where hoarding has been identified at level 5 – 9 and the person with the hoarding disorder has declined a HFSV or will not allow access to their home, this should prompt a discussion with the station commander/borough commander on the most appropriate course of action to address the risk to the resident/neighbouring properties.

7 Health and safety

- 7.1 It is essential to have read Policy number 1010 – Home fire safety visits (HFSV) policy and all associated policies as listed in that policy before carrying out a HFSV at a hoarding premises.
- 7.2 Staff must always consider their health and safety before entering the home of a resident. If the resident is a hoarder, a dynamic site risk assessment must be carried out on arrival at the home and control measures implemented where needed.
- 7.3 A full risk assessment on visiting a hoarding premises can be found in the Brigade Wide Documents library.

Appendix 1 – Clutter image rating (CIR)

Clutter Image Rating Scale: Kitchen

Please select the photo below that most accurately reflects the amount of clutter in your room.

 1	 2	 3
 4	 5	 6
 7	 8	 9

Clutter Image Rating: Bedroom

Please select the photo that most accurately reflects the amount of clutter in your room.



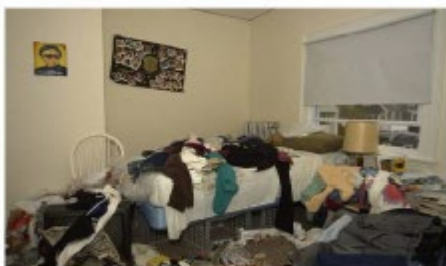
1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9

Clutter Image Rating: Living Room

Please select the photo below that most accurately reflects the amount of clutter in your room.



1



2



3



4



5



6



7

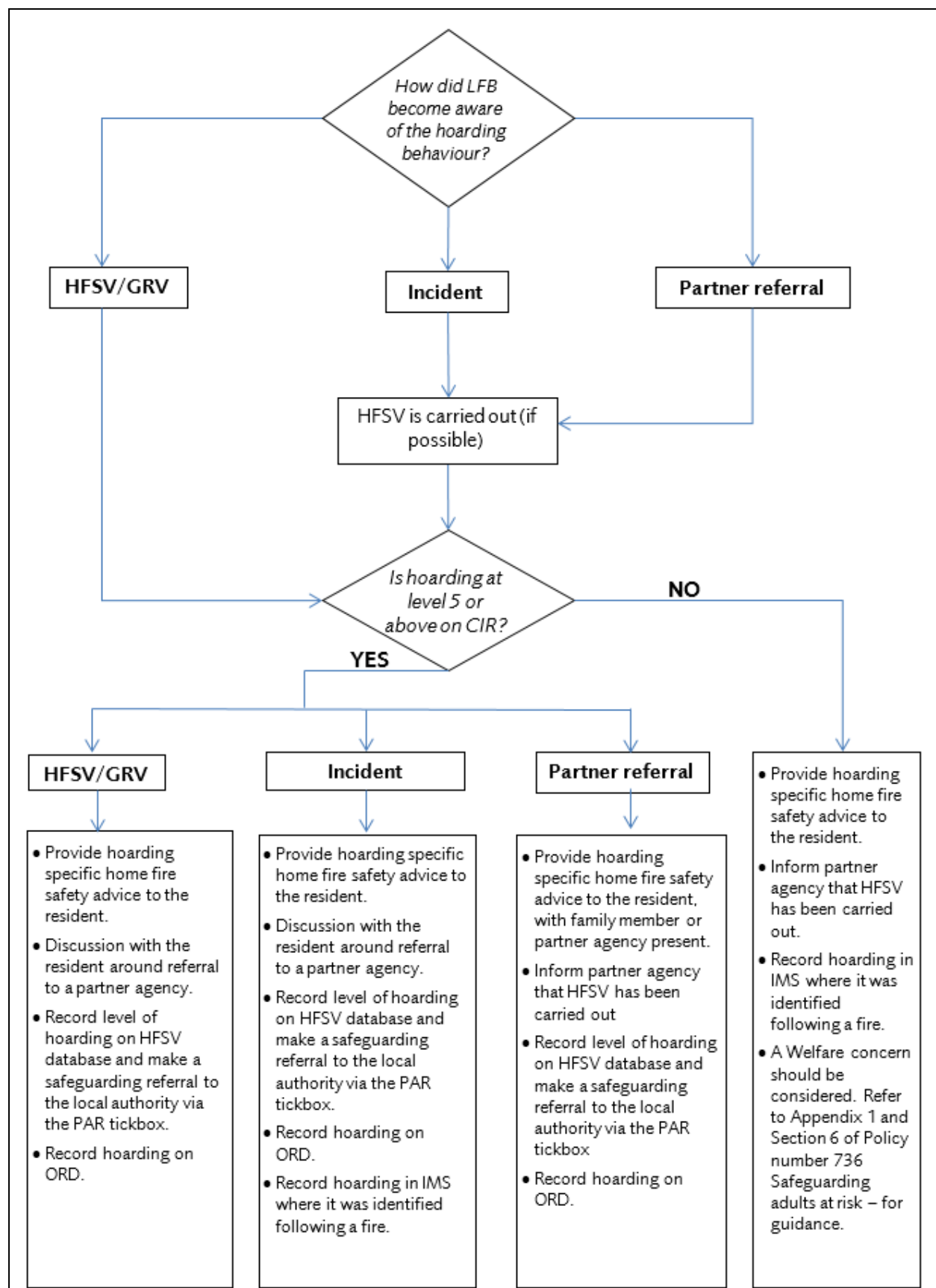


8



9

Appendix 2 – Actions to take when hoarding behaviour is identified



Appendix 3 – Understanding hoarding behaviour

Understanding hoarding behaviour

Hoarding behaviour is typically manifested in three ways:

- **Acquisition** – compulsive buying and/or the accumulation of free items such as newspapers, junk mail and items left at the side of the road. This can be motivated by the belief that having an item will bring comfort and make the person happy or that they are 'rescuing' items so that they are not wasted or lost. It can also provide a sense of security (especially where the person has been a victim of crime).
- **Saving** – there are three reason for saving: '*sentimental*' which can be motivated by grief and refers to the emotional attachment a person feels toward an object i.e. it may become linked to a happy memory or someone they love and miss; '*instrumental*' which can often stem from a history of having experienced deprivation, or of having had possessions forcibly taken from them in the past and so items are saved 'just in case I need them' or to guard against 'being without' again in the future; '*intrinsic*' or '*aesthetic*' where items are saved because they are seen as too beautiful to be discarded.
- **Disorganisation** – items of value are mixed in with rubbish and items of no apparent value. People who hoard often have difficulty with information processing, categorisation, sequencing tasks, and decision making. They may also believe that they have a poor memory which leads to items being stored where they are visible instead of put away in cupboards i.e. 'if I put them away, I won't be able to see them and if I can't see them I won't remember I have them and they will be lost to me'.

The complexities around the reasons why a person hoards and their emotional attachment to the items hoarded means that simply ordering or telling a person to clear their home will likely have no effect and/or may increase the person's anxiety, potentially exacerbating the problem.

The emotions stirred up when attempting to discard hoarded items can be too distressing and/or leave the person feeling vulnerable and insecure. In addition, difficulty with decision making and not being able to break a task down into smaller steps could mean that the process of clearing hoarded items is overwhelming for the person and so avoided.

It is also common for people who hoard not to recognise the severity of the problem and ignore, or not see, the clutter in their home. Conversely, the person who hoards may be acutely aware of the issue and feel embarrassed, leading them to feel defensive and/or deny that there is a problem.

All of this can prevent a person from discarding hoarded items.

Best practice

To reduce the risk of fire associated with hoarding, it is important to deliver fire safety messages in a way most likely to influence a change in behaviour. A staged, goal oriented approach to clearing high risk areas in the home is more likely to be successful as it reduces anxiety by providing the person who hoards with a sense of control. The focus should be on small, simple steps i.e. agreeing to store items away from heat sources such as cooking appliances and heaters and keeping escape routes clear.

To support this approach, the following best practices have been developed in consultation with psychologists who specialise in working with people who hoard.

Do not:

- make assumptions or judgements about a person's reasons for hoarding or whether they suffer from a mental health condition;
- use judgmental expressions, either verbal, e.g. referring to clutter as 'junk', or non-verbal, e.g. shaking your head or tutting;
- use expressions such as 'squalor', 'dirty' or 'filthy';
- tell the person what they should and should not keep, or how they should dispose of possessions;
- touch belongings without permission.

Do:

- seek to understand the hoarder's perspective by asking interested questions;
- match the person's language e.g. referring to items as 'collections' or 'things';
- explain the HFSV process clearly;
- help give the resident control by asking permission before moving around different areas of the property;
- give clear and direct advice following the 'top tips' to reduce the risk of fire;
- stay focused on shared solutions that benefit both the person who hoards and the Brigade;
- approach the situation as a collaborator i.e. you are working with the person who hoards to identify fire risks and finding ways to reduce them; and
- acknowledge small changes e.g. reaching an agreement to keep escape routes clear.

Appendix 4 - Helping hoarders reduce the risk of fire

Top tips

- 1 If you store large amounts of possessions in and around your home, you can help keep yourself safe from fire by following the advice below. Our 'top tips' are small, simple steps that can easily be included in your regular weekly/daily clearance sessions.
- 2 Whether you use a traditional oven/hob, or other methods of cooking such a portable stove, make it a priority to keep the cooking area clear.
- 3 Do not place items on or close to heaters, lamps, or other electrical equipment.
- 4 Do not store cylinders in your home as they are a serious hazard during a fire. If you have a medical need for cylinders, they should be kept upright and outdoors where possible – never store cylinders in basements, under stairs or in cupboards with electric meters/equipment.
- 5 If you smoke, use a proper ashtray that won't burn and put it on a flat, stable surface so that it can't tip over easily. Don't leave your lit cigarettes unattended.
- 6 Put candles/tea lights in heat resistant holders that hold the candle/tea light firmly and ensure it is placed on a flat, stable, heat resistant surface. Keep candles/tea lights away from anything that can catch fire, and never leave them unattended.
- 7 Make sure you have linked working smoke alarms installed in every level of your home and covering every room where a fire could start. Test them as part of your regular clearance sessions. You can contact your local fire service for advice.
- 8 Plan and practise how to escape from your home if there were a fire. Choose an escape route and keep it clear of possessions – in the event of a fire this will help you to escape quickly or allow firefighters to reach you if you are unable to escape.
- 9 Ensure possessions are stored on stable surfaces and do not stack items to a height that they become unstable – they could fall over blocking your escape.
- 10 Newspapers and mail stored in bulk are highly combustible and will cause a fire to spread rapidly. Sort mail and newspapers on the day you receive them and recycle them on a regular basis.
- 11 In the event of a fire, do not attempt to put it out yourself – leave your home straight away and call the fire brigade once you are safely outside. Do not stop on your way out to collect possessions and do not go back inside once you have escaped.
- 12 If you feel that you need some help or assistance with the above, there are many organisations that will support you through the process free of charge.

Appendix 5 - Incident Management System (IMS)

1. Open the incident details record :

Incident Details - Incident Number: 145658121

Incident Navigation Actions

Details Resources Location Fire Information Action Damage Persons Investigations

Details

Incident Number: 145658121

Date From: Station Ground: G36 - Hammersmith

Date To: Over the Border: No Home FRS Attended: In which FRS was the Incident: Other FRS Incident Number:

Call

Date/Time of Call: 24/11/2012 03:21:34 GMT

Origin of Call: Person (land line)

Late Call: No

Stop Code: F - Primary Fire

Date/Time of Stop: 24/11/2012 09:37:52 GMT

Date/Time of Close: 24/11/2012 09:37:52 GMT

Attendance

Property Type: Purpose Built Flats/Maisonettes - Up to 3 storeys

Floor/Level of Origin: -1

Fatalities, injuries, rescues, extrications: Yes

Persons Evacuated: Yes

All Property Derelict: No

Chimney Fire: No

Hazardous Materials Involved: No

RTC Incident: No

Attack on Firefighters: No

Type of Attack:

Serious Injuries: 0

Slight Injuries: 0

Special Study

1 Incident

eFit

Close

Start Fire deaths Scrutiny - Wi... Inbox - regina.bonas@l... 20130208-Hoarding_Pol... IMS - Union Street Incident Details - Inc...

2. Click on the **Damage** tab and under 'Human Factors Contributing to Fire' select the option '**Excessive and dangerous storage**' as shown below:

Incident Details - Incident Number:

Incident Navigation Actions

Details Resources Location Fire Information Action **Damage** Investigations DAT

Cause/Start: Fire Size

How Fire Started

Main Cause of Fire:

Manufacturer of Faulty Appliance:

Model of Faulty Appliance:

Caused by:

Human Factors Contributing to Fire:

Impairment due to Suspected Drugs/Alcohol a Contributory Factor in Fire:

Source of Ignition:

Ignition Source Powered By:

Item Damaged First:

Item Mainly Responsible for Development of Fire:

Was There Rapid Fire Growth:

Dangerous Substances/Explosions

Dangerous Substances Involved:

Explosion:

Material Involved in Explosion:

What Stage in Lifetime of Fire did Explosion Occur:

Containers Involved:

Property Information

Place Where Fire Started:

Household Occupancy at Time of Fire:

Special Method of Building Construction Involved:

Heat And Smoke Damage Only (No Flame Damage)?:

Document history

Assessments

An equality, sustainability or health, safety and welfare impact assessment and/or a risk assessment was last completed on:

EIA	30/04/13	SDIA	H - 19/03/13	HSWIA	18/06/18	RA	18/06/18
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Audit trail

Listed below is a brief audit trail, detailing amendments made to this policy/procedure.

Page/para nos.	Brief description of change	Date
Throughout	Minor amendments made.	27/07/2021
Throughout	References to cancelled PN927 replaced with PN1010 – Home fire safety visits (HFSV) policy.	18/03/2024
Throughout	References to cancelled PN800 - Management of operational risk information replaced with PN1024 - site specific risk information - knowledge skills and competence – NOG.	25/09/2025
Page 6, para 6.4	Amended in line with agreed language change.	07/10/2025

Subject list

You can find this policy under the following subjects.

Hazardous materials	

Freedom of Information Act exemptions

This policy/procedure has been securely marked due to:

Considered by: (responsible work team)	FOIA exemption	Security marking classification