

Animal Hoarding: A Practitioner's Perspective

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Plan for this session

- Defining animal hoarding and its characteristics
- Interventions – what works / been tried / does not work
- Animal welfare vs personal autonomy
- Partnership working
- An example of a case
- Health, Safety and wellbeing of staff

Background & positionality

- Chartered Environmental Health Practitioner
- Animal Activity Licensing
- Animal Welfare Act 2006
- Reflective practitioner
- Defensible decision making – balancing animal welfare / public health / risk / autonomy



The importance of pets

- 62% of UK households in 2022 owned a pet – dogs (34%), cats (28%), rabbits / guinea pigs / hamsters (5.2%), birds / fowl (4.2%) (PFMA, 2022)
- Pet ownership is seen as important for child development (Melson, 2003)
- Children perceive pets as family members, friends, and of providing unique emotional support and form long lasting bonds. (Trienbenbacher, 1988)
- If primary attachment fails, then children may attach to a pet as a substitute for human relationships (Rynearson, 1978)

The origins of animal hoarding.

- First described and characterised 'multiple animal ownership' based on case histories (1973 -1979) received by NYC Dept of Health and the ASPCA (Worth and Beck, 1981).
- Patronek (1999); HARC (2002); Patronek (2006) widely credited with advancing knowledge of an 'under recognised and poorly understood phenomenon'. Believed to occur in most communities.
- Included in DSM-IV-TR as a symptom of OCD or OCPD. DSM-5 HD classified as an independent disorder (Fontenelle & Grant, 2014; APA, 2013)
- Sometimes referred to as 'Noah Syndrome' (Saldarriaga-Cantillo & Nieto, 2015).

Hypothesised underlying causes of animal hoarding

- Genetic influences, early life experiences, traumatic events, dysfunctional family history (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Steketee & Frost, 2003, 2007; Arluke, *et al.*, 2017)
- Personality traits – being withdrawn, anxiety, insecurity, rigidity, need for safety (Costa, *et al.*, 2020)
- Provides an emotional comfort, preference to establish bonds with animals than people due to previous difficult relationships (Nathanson, 2009; Patronek & Nathanson, 2009; Steketee, *et al.*, 2011)
- Impaired insight linked to organic problems and cognitive difficulties especially executive functioning resulting in a lack of empathic ability to recognise the deteriorating situation (Patronek, 1999; Dozier *et al.*, 2019; Paloski, *et al.*, 2020)

Defining Animal Hoarding

Patronek (1999) & HARC (2002) present it as a public health issue & introduced diagnostic criteria:

1. Having more than the typical number of companion animals.
2. Failing to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter, and veterinary care.
3. Denial of the inability to provide minimum care, and the impact of that failure on the animals.
4. Persistence, despite these failures, in accumulating animals.

So how many is too many?

- Rather than a number, what defines the disorder is the inability of the individual to offer minimum necessary care to animals

Williams (2014)

- Differentiation between animal hoarders from individuals who have many animals but are not considered hoarders. i.e. proper treatment, lack of interference with home or in functioning of individual personal

Steketee *et al.*, (2011)

Sub-types of Animal Hoarder

Overwhelmed care givers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Passively acquired, often due to failure to neuter.• AH may be aware of deteriorating conditions but minimise due to strong emotional attachment to animals.• Often known in the neighbourhood as someone who will take in unwanted / stray animals.
Rescuer / mission driven	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Active acquisition of animals, determined that none are euthanised.• Can have network of supporters.• May say they operate a 'no kill' shelter
Exploitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack any empathy – but can be superficially charming and plausible.• Go out to access more animals, are controlling, overvalue their own expertise, lack guilt or remorse

How are Animal Hoarders portrayed?

Often presented in a way that elicits revulsion, sympathy or humour rather than compassion and understanding. (Arluke, *et al.*, 2002)



Eleanor Abernathy, 'The Crazy Cat Lady', The Simpsons.

Characteristics of Animal Hoarders

Research suggests:

- Female
- Predominantly middle-aged/older
- Unmarried / living alone
- Unemployed
- Urban areas

(Nadal, et al., 2020; Stumpf, et al., 2023)

Prevalence of animal hoarding is estimated at between 0.8 to 3.71 cases per 100,000.

(Worth & Beck, 1981; da Cunha *et al.*, 2017)



Characteristics of animal hoarding cases

A systematic literature review reported:

- Most cases are cats and dogs, but any animal can be hoarded, e.g. small mammals, reptiles, farm animals, horses, birds etc.
- Average number of animals per case 64.
- Dead animals often present 32.9%.
- Object / Animal Hoarding comorbidity ~ 60% of cases.
- Living conditions are usually squalid, 75% of case insanitary.
- Usually identified / reported by neighbour/ family complaints.
- Difficult to resolve (up to 100% recidivism) most cases remain unresolved.

Nadal, *et al.*, 2020

It's not just cats and dogs...



Public health risks & squalor

Direct health and welfare impact on both the occupants and animals.

- Neighbours impacted (e.g. noise and smells).
- High risk of zoonoses.
- High levels of ammonia.
- Housing conditions likely to be deficient – poor domestic hygiene & sanitation, structural damage e.g. floorboards.
- Difficulty walking around property.
- Accumulations of waste and refuse – attraction/ infestation of vermin.
- Daily living compromised - cooking, cleaning, preparation spaces, sleeping.
- Fire / electrical wiring / falls risk.
- Social relations impaired / reclusive.



HARC, (2002); Patronek, Loar and Nathanson (2006); Laura, Oliverira and Irigaray (2017); Reinisch (2008)

Fitness of the lived environment

- Lack of boundaries
- Typically filthy, chaotic and squalid
- Transient – eviction, moving houses, crossing LA boundaries

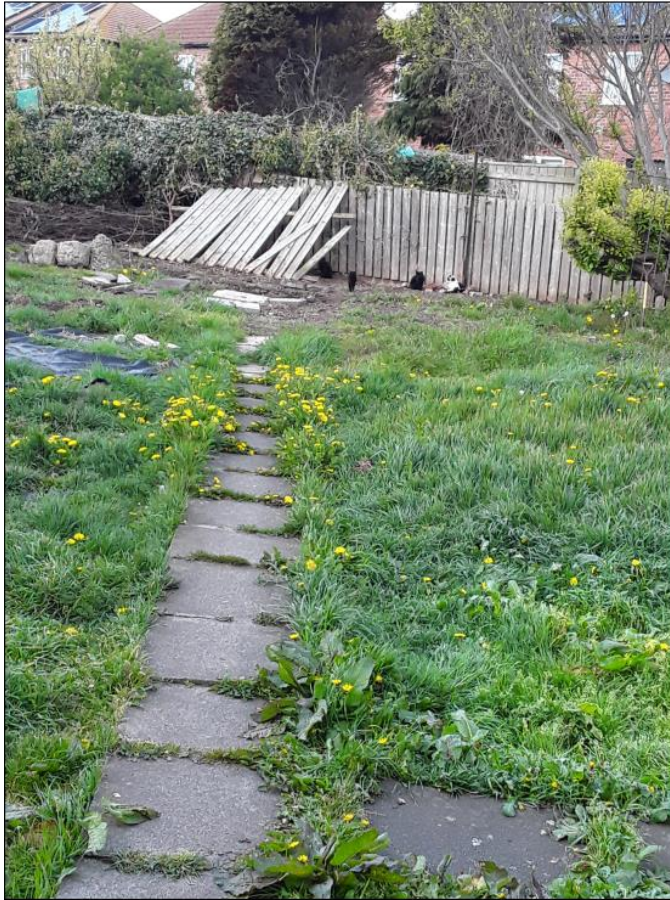
They [the animals] were upstairs, generally, the dogs were on the stairs and it was just running out the door, the faeces and urine was just running out of the door and when we got upstairs into the living area, no electric, no sanitation. She was just minging. I think I mentioned this, social services help ...nobody would get involved and [name] who was an Inspector at the time just thought what's that shining and he touched it. And there was millions of flies just rose into the air. And she was just laying newspaper on top of the cat faeces and sleeping on it...' (ID 04)

Identifying cases

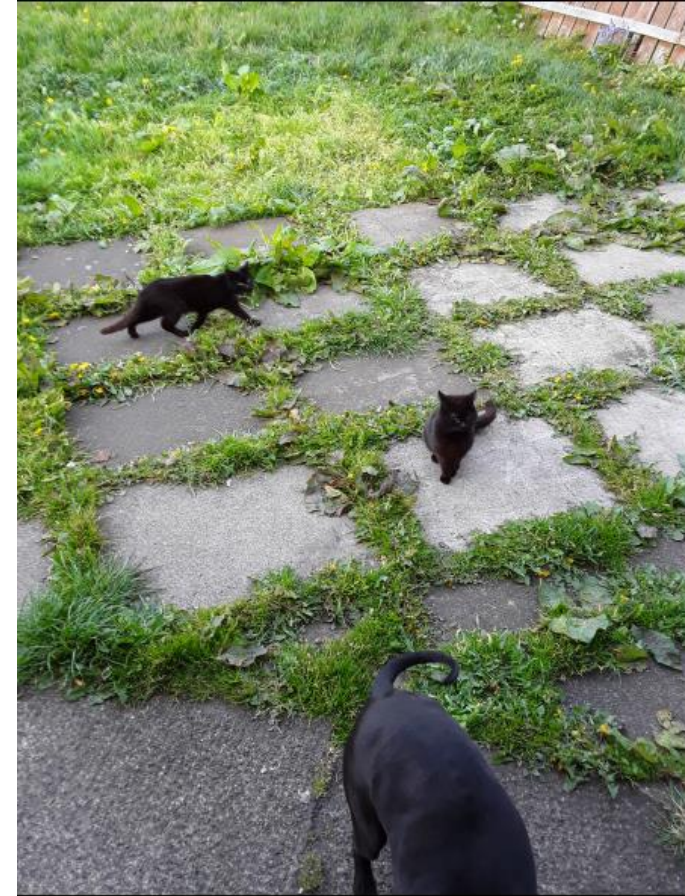
- Nuisance (odour, noise, pests)
- Self-neglect / hoarding
- Animal welfare
- Visit for a different reason (e.g. gas safety check)
- Health e.g. ambulance
- Anti-social behaviour
- Fire

But they don't generally come to our attention because of animal hoarding. They usually come to our attention because of self-neglect and hoarding, then when we go in to visit, we realise there's also an issue with animal hoarding (PI 07)






Examples of animal hoarding behaviours



- Reluctant / refusing entry
- Concealment of windows
- Faeces in garden
- Noise
- Pest infestations
- Odour
- Chaotic living
- Complaints about animals



Animal Welfare – The 5 Freedoms

		Application to Animal Hoarding
	Suitable Environment	Living conditions of inappropriate / progressive deterioration Insanitary conditions (urine / faeces) Confinement in small / inadequate spaces due to numbers
	Suitable Diet	Malnutrition Hunger / overfeeding
	Able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns	Behavioural problems because of how they are kept e.g. poorly socialised
	Need to be housed, with or apart from, other animals	Sometimes caged, stacked (or even dead)
	Need to be protected from pain, suffering,	Poor health of animals / lack of access to veterinary treatment.

Animal Welfare Act 2006 – Challenges

- No specific body (or state organisation) has a statutory duty to enforce welfare requirements of the AWA 2006
- Act sets out **discretionary** powers for local authorities to appoint Inspectors (S.51 AWA 2006) – not all LAs have
- Inconsistent and varied approach
- Capacity / resources of LAs stretched
- Lack of ‘ownership’ of the Act

House of Commons: Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Select Committee (2016)

Animal Welfare Act 2006

Challenges

Animal Charities

- No legal powers
- Anyone in England and Wales can take a private prosecution against someone believed to have committed an offence (Prosecution of Offences Act 1985)
- RSPCA criticised for an overzealous approach to enforcement – targeting vulnerable, ill or elderly people and removal of their animals
- But RSPCA takes 90% of the prosecution activity on animal welfare
- Should a charity be undertaking enforcement?
- Fills a role not currently performed by local government

House of Commons: Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee (2016)

Impact on Professionals

Animal hoarding cases are complex and very difficult to resolve, as they involve multiple agencies, often working to different legislation. The following are often involved:

Animal rescue charities	Vets
Emergency services	Voluntary sector
Environmental health	Housing officers
Mental Health Teams	Social workers
Health care professionals	Clearance and clean-up squads

Cases are made more difficult as the person involved might move around the country or may have the support of the public who see them as an 'animal rescuer'.

Examples of Interventions

Informal

- Identifying motivating factors
- Multiple visits / negotiated clean ups
- Negotiated animal removal, downsizing, neutering
- Care Act / Mental Capacity assessment
- Therapeutic support

Formal

- Staged approach (regulators code)
- Statutory notices (eg EPA, CPW/CPN, PDPA)
- Works in default
- Tenancy enforcement / eviction
- Safeguarding
- Prosecution

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Examples of Interventions

Very few studies have reported on the outcomes of interventions for animal hoarding.

Wake County, North Carolina (Strong, *et al.*, 2019)

- Multi-disciplinary approach to assist companion animals hoarding.
- Staff trained and supported in crisis intervention and psychology.
- Negotiate voluntary relinquishment of animals.

Manchester (Hill, *et al.*, 2019)

- offered free cat neutering services and welfare support to 10 multi-cat households in Manchester.

Motivational Interviewing (Williams, *et al.*, 2022)

- MI training provided to equine welfare officers involved in equine hoarding.

Engagement Strategies

- Building trust
- Same staff
- Tenacity
- Different types of letter
- Universal versus specialist teams

*Often, we might turn up with a food parcel ohh or something material that we can offer, and we'll say, we don't have to come in...we're just checking up on you...we'll just have a chat... And cat and dog food as well, if you turn up with that, that can go along way and a lot of the charities will give you that free.
(PI 07)*

Staff, Health, Safety and Wellbeing

- Dynamic risk assessment
- Training and supervision
- Staff wellbeing – debrief / supervision / peer support with challenging cases



An Example



- It's Friday afternoon the Police phone requesting support
- Env Health history – EPA notice for animal faeces in back garden
- Modest sized 3-bedroom property, social landlord
- No one had entered the property or knew how many animals were inside
- It's August – no one had been in the property since Thursday.

What we did

- Friday night warrant obtained (refused to voluntarily surrender)
- Saturday morning warrant exercised (2 Police dog handlers + Officer, 3 Animal Health officers, 3 x EHOs, 1 Housing Officer, locksmith, Vet, kennels)
- Vet determined overcrowded conditions likely to cause suffering
- Animals taken into local authority care

So what was behind the door?





Reflections

- Took a long time to get final Court Order
- Hugely expensive & resource intensive (~£10,000+)
- All dogs were neutered and microchipped
- Court agreed to return of 3 dogs
- Remainder placed with a specialist breed rescue organisation out of the area
- 6 x monthly visits as part of order
- No further complaints
- Was it a successful outcome?

Some final thoughts...

- ‘Caring about animals is not the same as caring for animals’
- Inanimate objects do not require attention
- Balance of lifestyle choice
- Refusal /reluctance of agencies to get involved
- Removal of animals will not solve the problem
- Multi-disciplinary approaches show most promise

Thank you for listening

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