

# Responding to hoarding and squalor

## Key messages

health

June 2013

**In Victoria a broad range of sectors and related services have been responding to hoarding and squalor situations, often in isolation from one another.**

**The publication *Hoarding and squalor – a practical resource for service providers* has been developed with the aim of providing direction and context to strengthen the capacity of government-funded and private services to work together when responding to hoarding and squalor situations.**

## Responding to hoarding and squalor

The person concerned and their dependants (including children, those who are frail or disabled and animals) all need to be kept central when planning action or decisions. They may be reluctant to accept assistance.

Service providers can discuss options with the person, working with them to assist their situation. However, the person has the right not to pursue suggested courses of action, if the situation is safe and the risk is minimal.

In the first instance, when a service provider responds:

- establish if there are any immediate risks
- build rapport
- aim for a considered harm minimisation approach.

Working with a person who lives in squalor or with hoarding behaviour can require a variety of different approaches.

'One-off clean-ups' are not effective and cause great distress to the person with the hoarding behaviour, particularly if they are not involved or considered.

If environmental health authorities need to take action and arrange a clean-up based on environmental health concerns, the person needs to be supported by an integrated approach including people services.

Focusing predominantly on the severity of clutter in a home or degree and type of squalor, in isolation from the person, will not be effective.

There is a high probability that the person living with hoarding and squalor has an underlying hoarding disorder or a treatable, diagnosable cognitive or psychiatric condition, and that this could greatly inform the most appropriate management of the situation. Service providers should attempt to arrange a clinical assessment to inform action planning and management.

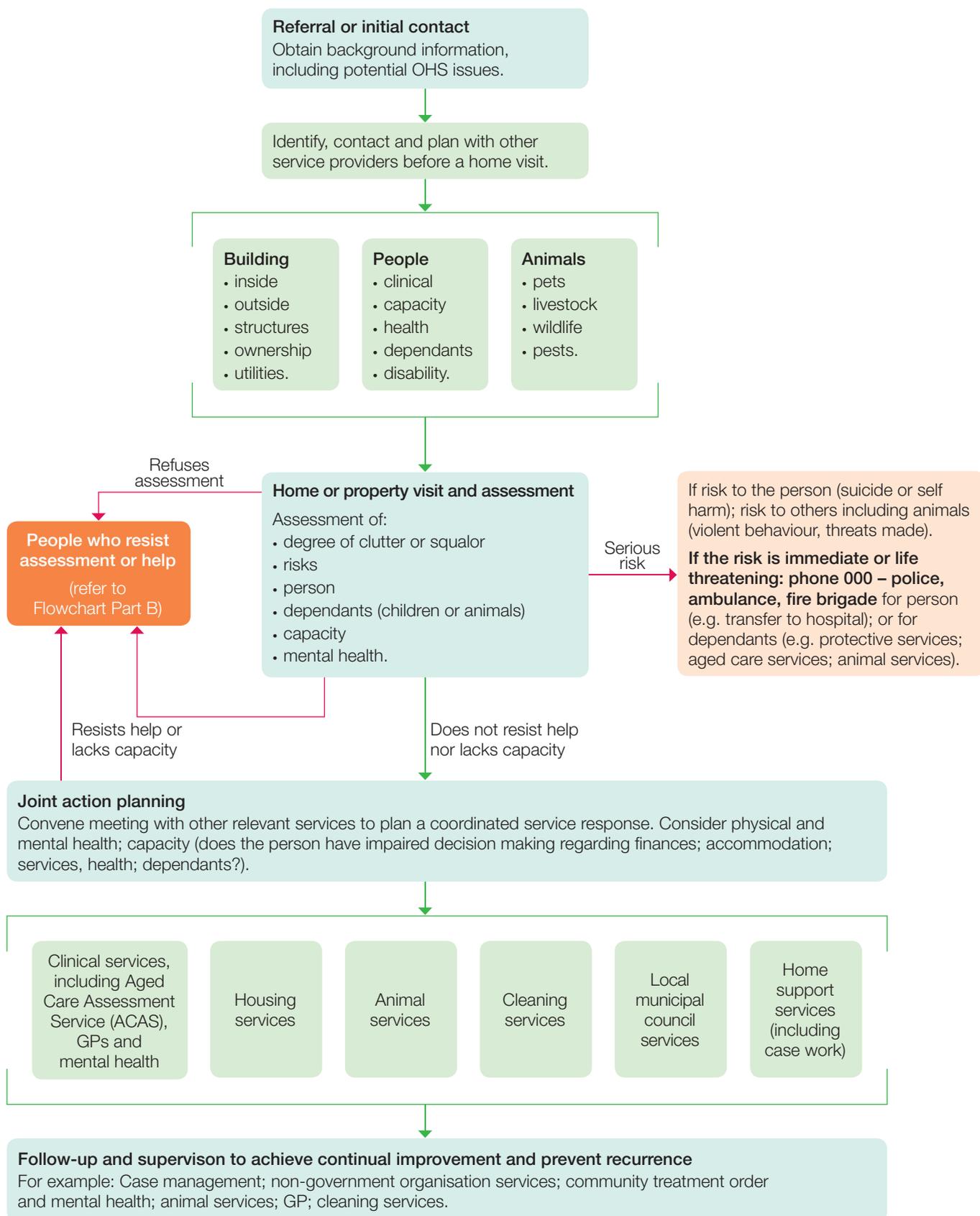
A maintenance plan should be considered to support the person's achievements in the longer term.

## Defining hoarding and squalor

**Hoarding behaviour** is the persistent accumulation of, and lack of ability to relinquish, large numbers of objects or living animals, resulting in extreme clutter in or around premises. This behaviour compromises the intended use of premises and threatens the health and safety of people concerned, animals and neighbours.

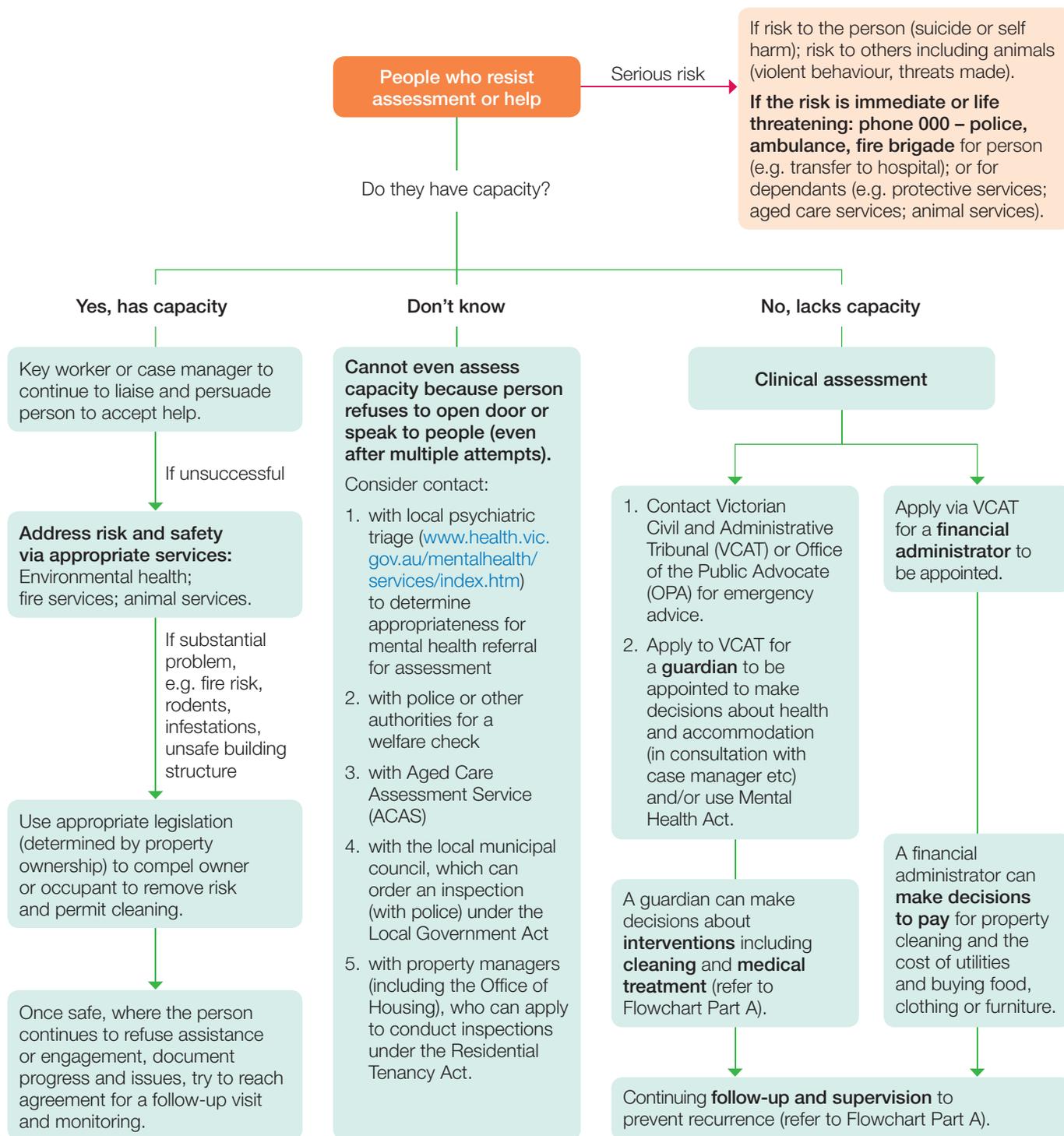
**Squalor** describes an unsanitary living environment that has arisen from extreme or prolonged neglect, and poses substantial health and safety risks to people or animals residing in the affected premises, as well as others in the community.

## Hoarding and squalor service response flowchart (Part A)\*



\* Adapted with permission from: Snowdon J, Halliday G 2009, How and when to intervene in cases of severe domestic squalor. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 21, pp. 996–1002.

## Hoarding and squalor service response flowchart (Part B)\*



\* Adapted with permission from: Snowdon J, Halliday G 2009, How and when to intervene in cases of severe domestic squalor. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 21, pp. 996–1002.

## Responding is complicated

People of all ages, including children, may hoard or live in squalor, and they can be found in any type of housing and living situation. Prolonged or extreme hoarding may lead to squalor.

Hoarding behaviour and squalid living environments can pose a number of associated problems and concerns in a person's life which may involve laws, policies and requirements in areas as diverse as:

- personal safety
- fire risk
- sanitation
- mental health
- physical health
- child protection
- animal protection
- building safety
- housing.

These circumstances are challenging and complex. Effective intervention requires professionals from a very broad range of private and public sectors to work together, meeting legal and ethical requirements while also ensuring that the current and future health and safety of the person, their family and animals are being addressed.

## Hoarding and squalor – a practical resource for service providers

The practical resource presents a common response framework by:

- discussing the difference between hoarding behaviour and a squalid environment, where they intersect and why
- placing the person, human dependants and animals first in a planned response, ensuring they are safe and risk is minimised
- presenting direction on how all services might work collaboratively
- confirming a common language, systems and tools that can be utilised by services
- presenting information about service types, what they do and how to contact them
- presenting questions and answers, case studies and a resources and contacts listing.

For further information and feedback contact [aged.care@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:aged.care@health.vic.gov.au) or phone 03 9096 7389.

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### Copies of the hoarding and squalor publications

**Hoarding and squalor – a practical resource for service providers** (available only in soft copy) can be found at: [www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/publications/hoarding.htm](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/publications/hoarding.htm)

This publication, **Responding to hoarding and squalor: key messages**, is available in:

- hard copy (printed), which can be obtained by contacting the Department of Health-appointed distribution centre, Warehousing Fulfilment Distribution Solutions (WFDS) – phone: (03) 9793 8111 or email: [orders@wfds.com.au](mailto:orders@wfds.com.au) by providing details of the quantity required and address for delivery
- soft copy (web based) – refer to [www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/publications/hoarding.htm](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/agedcare/publications/hoarding.htm)