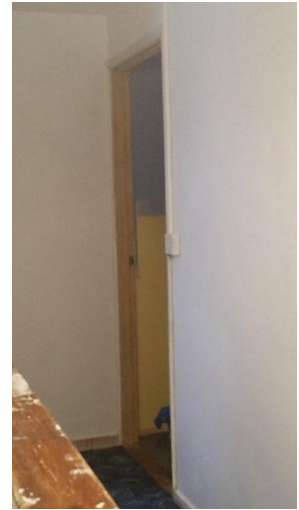
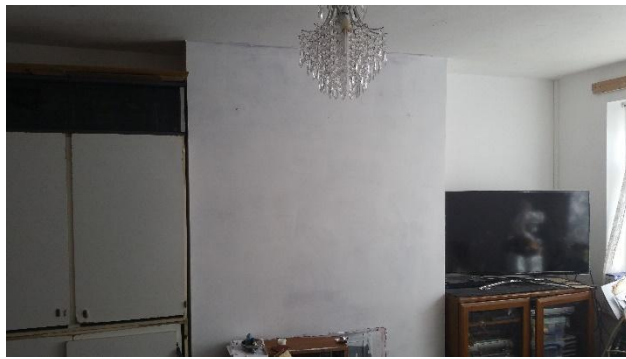


Beneath the clutter

George and Melissa's story



July 2020



October 2019



The Story

A need to declutter the house to enable a rewire, new central heating and essential and general repairs to take place. To make the home safe.

Background of George and Melissa

Significant childhood trauma. Which affected how we trusted anybody with authority.

Growing up poor even though parents had jobs. Parents were hoarders.

What our possessions mean to us

- “a comfort blanket”
- “a link to the past, memories”
- “it’s the story of each item”
- “An escape from real life traumas and problems”

Work carried out

- George and Melissa worked together with the Housing Officer, Social Worker, and Fire Service
- We all attended regular Self Neglect and Hoarding case Conferences, chaired by Adult Protection Senior Practitioner
- Lofty Heights worked with George and Melissa on decluttering

The result

A decluttered house and repairs etc done. But items moved to storage units instead of discarding items.

Storage Units

Initially the plan was for the home to be decluttered. However, this did not work. So instead, items were moved to three storage units, paid for by Melissa and George. This is where the items still are, and we are about to arrange support with sorting through them.

“We felt this was the only solution as we were unable to comply in the time allocated. This has enabled us to sort and discard items in our own time when we felt able to. As the house had to be cleared and it became evident that we needed more than just physical help”.

What worked well?

- Relationship with Housing Officer Duncan Smith— had built up trust and a good relationship over time. “We not only did not want to lose our home but also did not want to let Mr Smith down by not doing the decluttering”.
- A particular Lofty Heights worker, nicknamed ‘Tetris’ for his excellent packing skills! He had a respectful approach toward us and our possessions. “If he had helped in the beginning things may have had a quicker result. The right person with the right skills makes all the difference”.

What was difficult?

Converging pressures:

strength of attachment to possessions vs the time pressure to make the home environment safe.

- “We really needed some kind of mental help. There was no Mental Health help before, during or after the declutter”.
“If we had even a couple of meetings in the beginning, to go through the mental process of coping, instead of jumping straight into it might have helped. No one helped us to cope while going through the process.”
“They were more focused on dumping everything, it was the fast pace of it all”.
- George had sessions with the Wellbeing Service, and phone calls from Mental Health service, but both said that they could not help with hoarding issues.
“We could not just turn on a tap and all of a sudden know how to organise and sort things. Maybe we have undiagnosed conditions?”
- What would the support that was missing look like?
“To be listened to along the way, and about where we wanted to start”.
Melissa “we need help to know how to sort through things”
George: “It’s like being on a trapeze. I need to know there is a safety net”.
George: “We needed a third party – to rant and rave at – someone not involved, who could help us see it from all points of view, and help come up with more perspective, like the fire risk”.
“It was too much of a mental overload”
“It’s not just your house you have to declutter, it’s your brain you have to declutter at the same time”.
George: “It was like having to choose what child to keep.”

Other Learning / things we would do differently

- We wanted to have a trial of the two decluttering companies, to see which was the best fit. But we had to just go with the first one.

- Time needed for Melissa and George to get to know the people that were going to be working with them to help them to declutter and build up trust.
- Melissa: “We needed a gentler touch at the beginning – we would have got better results faster”.
- Recognition of physical health problems. The sessions were too long. We did not have enough time to recover mentally and physically before lofty heights were back again. Perhaps help to be mentally prepared in the beginning would have helped.
- Sticking to what was agreed. “We were told it would be nothing like the declutter programmes on the television. That they would take things slowly to begin with. But the declutters went at it like a bull in a china shop”.
- Acknowledgement of close family illness and subsequent deaths during the declutter.
- Observation from Social Worker –a pivotal moment - I felt that a pivotal moment was when IBC said that they would have to proceed with taking legal action if progress did not start to be made.

At this point, months had passed and very little progress in the declutter. After this, things sped up, and George and Melissa decided that in order to clear the house, they would move their possessions to storage units.

“We felt this was the only solution, as we were unable to comply in the time allocated. This enabled us to sort and discard items in our own time when we felt able to. When the threat of being made homeless was gone”.

Melissa and George had actually wanted to do this at the very beginning, but it was not supported at that stage, due to concerns about the possessions returning to the home at a later date.

- Moving the items to the storage unit gave George and Melissa time to learn that they can live without those possessions in their home, and they are now ready to tackle sorting through them, with support.
- Melissa explains that we both need help with knowing how to declutter, how to let go of things.

Barriers that stopped us from decluttering ourselves; other feedback

- Family problems
- Overwhelmed with the amount of stuff
- Where to put it
- What to get rid of and what to keep because we might need it.
- Disorganized thinking

George “What caused me to clutter? Physical and mental trauma? I have had lots of items taken away from me without my consent in the past. Sometimes just taking a photograph of the item

does not help. I need to be able to hold, touch and see the item especially if it was from someone dear to me”.

Melissa “What caused me to clutter? Physical and mental trauma? My health did not allow me to keep up with the cleaning and decluttering needed”.

Other feedback

- “Although we did need a push to get things sorted we did not need a shove. We were already on the edge and this nearly pushed us over. It was only because we managed to support each other after many arguments that we did not fall apart”.
- “Being shouted at to get it, grow a pair and man up, did not help. It just lowered my self esteem even further”
- “We were told in the beginning that we had to get rid of everything. The clutter scale pictures confirmed this. That the house was to be completely clinical like the bailiffs had been in”.
- Melissa- “To my mind having no items meant you were poor”.
- “Talking about what would happen if we died and the next tenants wanted was also upsetting to us. It did need to be said, as we did not want to leave everything for our daughter to sort out. Like I will have to do to my parents home”.
- “We are now more confused as to what to keep and what to discard as we feel we can not have anything in the house apart from basic furniture etc which does not make it feel like a home. It makes you wonder if life is worth living”.
- Felt embarrassed when decluttering workers possessions put on the front lawn and expected us to sort it out there. Did not like that the Lofty Heights van advertised on the side that it is a decluttering service. “It felt humiliating”. We later used a gazebo in the back garden as a place to sort through things.
- George – “I can see why there are some homeless people that refuse help because what is the point of being in a house if you cannot have anything?”.